
CubexCursedxCurious Volume10

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Novel illustrations included in Volume 10:



3

—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious

X

水瀬葉月
Illustration ちょりがため

電撃文庫



C³ シーキューブ・X

水瀬葉月

電撃文庫
Ⓜ
570



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みなせ はづき
水瀬葉月

皆様のおかげでついに二桁突入です！ というわけで写真はX巻発売の記念に既刊に挟まってみた作者の図。むぎゅー。最初はノーマルなやつ一個しか持ってなかったルービックキューブも、このX巻までの間にモリモリとコレクション数が増加。でもこの7×7×7とか、買ったはいいいけど揃えられる気がしない……。

【電撃文庫作品】

結界師のフーガ1〜3
ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス1〜3
C³-シーキューブ-I〜X
藍坂素敵な症候群 1〜2

イラスト: さそりがため

ついに10巻ですね。ふた桁おめでとうございます〜。ここ数年間、私の生活もC³と共にありました。これからも精魂込めてフィア達を応援したいと思います！

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



CubexCursedCurious



3
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C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

や ち は る あ き
夜知春亮

夜知家の大黒柱。バレンタインの季節だけど、枯れているので周囲の浮かれ具合にも気づかないようで!?

「相変わらず目立ってんなあ、
と思ってさ」

「あのイナカ女め……一人で
目立ちおって。そんなに
自分の運動神経を
アピールしたいのか!」

フィア

今度は初めてのバレンタイン! いろいろそそのかされて、ホワイトデーの3倍返しおせんべを狙って奮闘します。

ン・イゾー

錐霞に代わる監視役として春亮たちの高校に転校してきた研究室長国の一員。制服もヘソ出して着こなします。

「……はー!」

Scene01:既知なる転校生



「ああ……美味しいな、本当に……」

「わたしの、チョコ……舐め……」

「によ、わ……!」

「正直……そのほぐが、燃える」

「ば、馬鹿げて、いる……!」

うえのきりか
上野 雫霞
冷静沈着なクラス委員長。バレンタインに向けて思うところがあるようだけど、その本心は……?

むら まさ
村正 このは
いつもの淑やかさをかなぐり捨て、恵まれすぎたものを活かした禁断のチョコ作戦を発動なのか!?

Scene03:蘇りし者とその追っ手

ひ む ら す な お
日村素直

錐霞に執着する研究室長国の一員。退院後、教師として復帰する。

「俺は——
変わることにした」

ひ な い
雛井エルシー

捕虜となった同胞を処刑するためにやってきた元気娘。自信満々に間違った英語を使う。

「実にグッドメス……
的確な指示だと思っ
てます。逃がす気はないからね」

???

日村が連れてきた少女。彼女の名は……。

Contents

10

プロローグ

26

第一章「腹時計とチョコレートタイム」

"Study for Saint Valentine's Day"

68

第二章「懐中時計の二分間」

"The place where heart is"

170

第三章「大時計が見つめない街」

"Four minutes - for minutes"

238

第四章「四分後の振り子時計」

"A hand stops , but never reverses"

308

エピローグ



C³X

—シーキューブ—
Cube×Cursed×Curious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため



Prologue

Part 1

On a certain day in late January...

Just as the noise of cheering was heard from the sports ground where PE class was taking place, Haruaki, dressed in gym clothes and sitting on the floor, turned his head to look and sighed lightly.

Sitting beside him, Taizou asked, probably because of seeing him sigh:

"Haruaki, what's up? If you sigh so suddenly, happiness will escape."

"No... I was just thinking how she's still so conspicuous."

"Oh, that girl? I was quite shocked in the beginning, but it can't be helped since she comes from a totally different cultural background. On the other hand, I'm quite used to it already."

"The same goes for that time with Fear. You guys' adaptability is really amazing... But it's not a bad thing, I guess."

Haruaki exhaled again and looked towards the sports ground where the girls were in lesson. The boys were taking turns playing soccer (Haruaki and others were not participating) while the girls were playing volley ball. Since PE lessons were held for two classes together, among the many familiar classmates on the field, girls from the adjacent class could be seen mixed between them.

One particular court was drawing the crowd's attention. With a stiff expression, a girl was performing an underhand serve cutely. After the volleyball slowly went over the net, one of the opposing team's players received it while another tossed it up unsteadily. Finally—

A dark-skinned figure leapt into the air.

"...Hoo!"

The figure gave off a short but forceful shout while spinning her body, sending the ball towards the other side of the court from high up in the air—Of course, she spiked the ball with her foot.

The opposing team exchanged glances with one another, bearing difficult expressions that seemed to be saying "no one can return this kind of ball..." while looking all around for assistance. At this moment, the teacher who was refereeing another match also seemed to have noticed the unusual behavior on this court.

"...Girl, Seat No.19 of Year 1 Class 1, do not spike the ball with your foot."

The shovel-wielding physical and health education teacher—Kaidou-sensei—spoke with great exasperation. Called out, the girl tilted her head slightly and flipped through the volleyball rulebook she was holding even during the match while saying:

"Pardon my bluntness, but this book says that 'players can legally strike or push the ball with any part of the body.' Reporting this kind of report."

"Although it does not count at breaking the rules, volleyball is essentially a competitive sport played using the arms and hands... Rules aside, treat it as a kind of etiquette. Also, the other students cannot practice if you use your foot. Think of it as holding back for them, so use your hands."

"Affirmative. However, the match already ended with that point... Based on new knowledge just gained, the ball just now should be the so-called match point."

"Is that so? Then just start with your next match. Okay girls, time for teams to swap. Next match up please."

Following Kaidou-sensei's instructions, another group of students took over the court. The dark-skinned girl walked over to the waiting area in full composure without being out of breath in any way.

Putting aside Taizou and others who had displayed amazing adaptability, Haruaki still felt there was something not quite right with this scene. A dark complexion with gray-colored hair. A gym uniform whose lower hem was forcefully tied up below the underarm to expose the navel. A pair of long and slender legs extending from a pair of shorts. At the very bottom was, of course, bare feet.

Un Izoey. As a member of «Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation», she had enrolled as a student in this school several weeks earlier because the superintendent had accepted Yamimagari Pakuaki's request. As a side note, she was placed into the same class as Konoha in Year 1 Class 1 next door... On that note, Class 2 also had a transfer student back in the second term—a certain noisy silver-haired lass. It would be problematic if Un Izoey were dumped into another class where no one knew the inside story, which was probably why Class 1 with Konoha's presence was chosen in the end.

Taizou nodded repeatedly and said:

"Yeah, her athletic abilities are really outstanding. Looks like the sports clubs will be competing for quite a while."

"Oh, as expected, there's a recruitment battle?"

"But she seems to be completely uninterested. Oh right, there's something I wanted to ask you! According to sources in the neighboring class, she seems to be quite friendly with Konoha-san! I heard that they're frequently talking together in private! This could very well be a hint from the gods, asking me to 'become good friends with that girl to gain another connection with Konoha-san and raise affection points'! Hey hey, what do you think they chat about? After returning home from school, did Konoha-san tell you anything?"

"W-Who knows."

Actually, Haruaki did know. Calling it chatting was not correct. Konoha was simply giving Un Izoey educational instructions along the lines of "Please do not do anything too bizarre!" Konoha probably had no wish to do this but being the only one in the class privy to Un Izoey's origins, she had no choice but to act as Un Izoey's surveillant and educator.

While Haruaki and Taizou chatted, a new set of teams took their positions on the court.

"Damn country girl... How dare she steal the spotlight on her own!? Does she want to show off her athleticism that much!? Wait and see, I can do everything that she can do!"

"Fear-kun, being motivated is very good and all, but please don't use your feet."

"Muu, Kirika. Why? That kind of trivial thing, I can—"

"Kaidou-sensei is warming up to swing her shovel."

"...Do it too. However, there are etiquette problems, right? Then forget about it."

On one side of the court was a team whose core was composed by girls from Year 1 Class 2, including the silver-haired girl—Fear, glancing sideways at Kaidou-sensei— and Kirika who was wearing a tracksuit as usual. The opposing team was a mixed group of students from Class 1 and 2.

"Oh! Fear-chan and Kirika-chan are our opponents! I have a feeling this battle will be intense...!"

"Oh there you are, Kana. I was thinking how it's rare for you not to be on our side. So you're on the other team."

"Because it's fun to be a mercenary once in a while. Konohacchi, do your best!"

"Cow Tits is there too huh... I see... Fufufufu! I feel sorry for Kana, but now that I know this, I can't hold back anymore!"

"I know this happens every time, but why do you have to be so defiant towards me...?"

Fear's opposing team included Kana and Konoha. Konoha was standing in the front row near the net while Kana was in the back. Then the match began. As a promising new star in the swimming club, Kana was quite athletic, in other words. After Kana fired off a spectacular overarm serve, Haruaki was expecting Kirika to step forward to receive and toss the ball, but as though saying that would be too slow, Fear jumped high up in the posture for an unexpected two-step attack.

"Cow Tits, try to block if you can! No matter how you try to use those soft and flabby walls to block me, the justice of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance will easily overcome them—!"

"Ridiculously incomprehensible words again...!"

Displaying jumping ability that was hard to imagine coming from her slender body, Fear flew into midair and spiked the ball as hard as she could. On the other side of the net, Konoha could be seen narrowing her eyes beneath her glasses. Then to block the spike, she jumped, causing two great bulges to be seen wobbling under her gym clothes—

"...Wow~ So scary~"

However, she only jumped a few centimeters and remarked in pretense while Fear's spike flew over her head.

The ball bounced off the court with a great slam. "Hmm~ As expected of Fear-chan." Kana nodded as she caught the ball after it rebounded. Fear angrily glared at the opposing team's blocker.

"Hey Cow Tits, play the game seriously!"

"I am very serious."

Clearly putting no effort in blocking, Konoha inclined her head and smiled.

"It can't be helped, after all, Fear-chan's athleticism is very outstanding! No problem, no problem, I, Kana, will instantly get a point back!"

"Sorry... We'll try to receive the balls at least."

Konoha and the rest of the team spoke as they rotated their positions. None of the other team members were surprised to see

Konoha failing to receive Fear's spike. Konoha was not holding back specially just for today. Rather, due to secretly possessing physical capabilities that no ordinary human could rival, she never used her true power in activities like PE in the first place. From the very beginning, Konoha has always played the role of a "girl not very good at sports" which would raise many questions if she suddenly started to compete seriously with Fear.

Fear was clearly displeased that her challenge was rejected unilaterally but she probably understood Konoha's difficulties. Despite upturned lips in a frown, Fear continued to play normally. .. Yes, this was a scene just as usual.

(However... It's probably not completely the same as usual.)

As expected of Konoha-san, even the way she cowers from the ball is so lovely... Haruaki pondered as he heard Taizou muttering while staring intently at the court.

The first thing different from usual was a scene that had started several weeks earlier.

Outside the court, the dark-skinned girl was sitting cross-legged on the ground, taking out something resembling a notebook from the collar of her gym uniform. Glancing frequently at Fear and the others, she wrote down something using a pencil. Probably nothing important—It was simply because she was very intent on executing her mission.

Then the second thing different from usual was a scene that had only started a couple days earlier.

"The ball's over there, Kirika!"

"...Eh? Oh... Sorry, I spaced out a little."

"Well—Don't worry about it. The lead is widening."

The ball bounced on the court. After picking it up, Kirika stared at the ball and sighed.

Indeed, it's quite strange—Haruaki thought.

(Recently, Class Rep... really seems quite distracted. Why?)

Part 2

After their teams finished the match, Fear returned to the waiting area outside the court. As usual, Cow Tits was not using her real skills, making Fear very displeased, but a victory was still a victory nonetheless, so it still felt great.

"Hey hey, Un Izoey-san, are you interested in archery?"

"Archery? I'm quite skilled."

"Really? You've done archery before? That's perfect, then could you visit the archery club next time to try out... No actually, just coming for fun is fine—"

"Due to the unknown, allow me to ask a question. What will the prey be? Does this country have *unmaniha* as well, only I've never seen them? Hopefully, they're not too strong."

"..."

Fear listened to Un Izoey's conversation with the other girls while finding a place to sit. At first, she was worrying whether Un Izoey might cause some kind of incident but it looked like she was not being ostracized or bullied by her class, but gradually becoming a part of them, probably... Although either way, it did not matter to Fear.

"Oh dear~ They ended up losing... Although they caught up a little towards the end~"

Kana remarked while sitting down beside Fear. Kirika and Konoha did the same.

The next match was starting on the court with Scoop-sensei acting as the referee. As long as they were not too noisy, chatting was fine.

"Oh right, it's almost that time of the year again."

"What do you mean?"

"It's here again~ Valentine's Day, VA-LEN-TINE'S! Not the Van Allen radiation belt! —Lemme try some of these cheesy jokes!"

"Nuu, you're suddenly getting very excited. Valentine's Day...? I think I've heard of it, but maybe not..."

"Eh? Do you really not know? Ohhh... God..."

Kana covered her face with her hands and shook her head in an exaggerated manner to imitate a foreigner. Then as though a switch had been flicked, she suddenly put her arm forcefully around Fear's shoulders.

"If you don't know, then I'll just have to tell you! It'd be a real shame if a cute girl like Fear-chan did not participate in this kind of special festival! Listen carefully. The day known as Valentine's Day happens only once a year, a girls' festival held by girls for the sake of girls! In other words—"

Kana explained in an especially excited tone of voice. After listening to most of it—

"Hmmuu, so February 14 is called Valentine's Day? How do you describe it? A festival related to love between opposite genders. Looks like it has nothing to do with me. Kana, are you participating?"

"Ugh!" Kana instantly groaned and turned her face away.

"V-Very regrettably... Even I, Kana, have been busy with stuff like the swimming club all year round, without any time to spend on pursuing romance. Right now, I don't even have a crush..."

"Then this festival is really none of our business."

Kana cleared her throat as though mustering her spirits, then waggled her index finger left and right:

"No no... Actually, there's more to the meaning of Valentine's Day than that. This is a once-a-year celebration, a grand event! Isn't it lonely if you can't participate? So there's also another case where you give chocolate to boys who normally take good care of you."

"Normally... taking care of me...?"

The image of a boy's face surfaced in Fear's mind. An idiotic and shameless face. Always engaged in a ton of shameless activities, always nagging, but always cooking delicious food for them, and also—

No no no—Fear shook her head repeatedly.

"I can't accept this, it's too weird. Even if someone helps me all the time, isn't it fine if I say thank you face to face? There's no reason at all to limit it to February 14. Also... Basically, being forced to spend money buying chocolate, that's totally one-sided and unfair for the girls—"

"Oh, it's not one-sided at all~ One month later, on White Day, there's a rule that boys who received chocolate have to give a return present to the girls! And the standard is to return three times the value!"

"Three times! This... What should I say... What a deal!"

In that case, the situation was not quite the same. What an astounding interest rate. 500yen's worth of stuff would become 1500yen. 1000yen would become 3000yen. Wonderful. It's even more profitable than Kuroe's beauty parlor!

"Basically, that's what people call 'courtesy chocolate.' So... How about the two of you here who've been acting like it doesn't concern you, what are your plans~?"

"M-Me? I... Umm..."

"Hmm...? Oh, Valentine's Day? Uh... Well..."

Konoha began to act awkwardly. Kirika, who had been lost in her own thoughts, also looked up as though she finally caught up to the conversation. For some reason, both of them glanced towards the boys who were playing soccer.

"I'm not asking which type of chocolate you're giving, but you will, right? Like Akki, for example."

"W-What are you talking about? Ahaha~ Uh, hmm... I guess... You're... right. We are cousins after all, it would be only natural."

"Ah... Hmm yes, being classmates after all, and I've troubled him quite a bit. Although I also feel like I'm being conned by confectionery companies' absolutely ridiculous gimmicks, not giving chocolate would seem a bit impolite... I guess. Probably, something like that."

These two girls are going to give chocolate to that guy? Then I guess I really should give him chocolate too. How should I put it, this... Although I worry if he might get the wrong idea and mistake it for love, no wait, why do I need to worry? Rather, that kind of misunderstanding is completely wrong in the first place, but why am I feeling agitated, surely this shouldn't matter at all—

"What about you, Fear-chan~?"

"Muu, uh... I don't think... I cause him too much trouble, but umm... After all, I'm living in his house and he cooks for us. If Cow Tits and Kirika gives but I don't, then it looks like I don't know my manners... Perhaps... Maybe? Umm... Valentine's Day is a cultural festival that involves this type of common understanding, right?"

"Hmm~ Maybe so~ Anyway, I think Akki will be really happy if he receives chocolate from Fear-chan~ Conversely, if he doesn't get any, he might end up quite depressed. Gufufu."

In that case, it can't be helped—Fear thought. That's right, there's absolutely no choice in this. Jeez, that shameless brat, giving me so much trouble.

"I have to ask something... Kana, roughly how much does chocolate cost? I earned some money from working part-time a few times, but I don't have much left after spending it on various things."

"Now is the time for me, Kana-sensei, to tell Fear-chan something important... In any case, handmade chocolate is the best

! Boys are the most happy when they receive handmade chocolate! Boys will feel the added value just from the fact that the chocolate is handmade from a girl. Probably ten times as happy!"

"Ten times...! Wait, wait, lemme think. Supposing someone made some chocolate that's equivalent to what's sold for 1000yen commercially..."

"Yes yes."

"After the boy receives it, the value he experiences is ten times a thousand—10000yen. Then on that whatever White Day, the return gift is triple—"

Fear gulped hard.

"In other words, the return gift is... 30000yen's worth of rice crackers!"

"Hold on a second! What's with the weird units of measurement you're using in your wishful thinking!?"

For some reason, Konoha was displeased by this perfectly logical reasoning. Kana also gave an incomprehensible response: "Ohoh! For just an instant, Fear-chan's eyes turned into Yen symbols~!" Then Konoha frowned in exasperation:

"Let me say this... Valentine's chocolate is a gift instilled with everyday gratitude rather than desire for a return gift. The important thing is how to convey your feelings of thanks and whether the receiver will be happy—However, if all you want is to

to prevent him from criticizing you for a lack of manners, go ahead and give chocolate anyway. I am quite doubtful that Haruaki would be delighted by such insincere motives."

At the very end, Konoha even scoffed twice lightly. It was very infuriating.

"What did you say!? Then let's make this a contest, Cow Tits! Simply giving chocolate to please the shameless brat is too easy... At least I'm confident that I can satisfy him more than you! Also, provided I can satisfy him, of course he'll give me an awesome gift in return!"

"Eh, using important Valentine's chocolate for a contest, that's really quite..."

"Haha, looks like you think you'll lose."

"Hmm..." Konoha frowned with displeasure but did not refute her outright, simply casting her glance elsewhere as though saying "whatever."

"I have no intention of having a contest at all. However, the end result will be my victory anyway. In other words, that's all there is to it, nothing more."

"Tsk, what bold words..."

Konoha looked quite calm and composed. Infuriating, sure enough.

However—Although it finally developed into a duel, things would be bad if they continued like this. After thinking calmly, Fear concluded this was going to be a tough battle. Konoha was most likely going to give handmade chocolate. In that case, Fear had no choice but to oppose her with the same, but... She had no skills in this area. Fear had never made any kind of chocolate at all.

(Then I'll need intensive training... Uumu, but how should I do it...?)

Think. Intensive training would need a location. Using the kitchen at home would be equivalent to exposing her abilities to the enemy, Cow Tits. Furthermore, Fear obviously had no idea how to make chocolate at all and needed a coach to instruct her and give opinions. A trustworthy coach who knew how to cook—

Upon further thought, only one candidate came to mind in the end. Fear knew that there would be many problems when the time came, but there was no other way. If the candidate were to refuse, then so be it.

Fear glanced sideways to make sure that Konoha's attention was not focused on her. Then Fear quietly leaned towards Kirika, who was sitting beside her, and whispered in her ear:

"Hey Kirika."

"Hmm?"

Lost in her own thoughts, it took Kirika a moment's delay to look up in response.

"Uh... I've got something... I'd like your help with. Although this probably offers you no benefit at all... No, since you already said you're giving chocolate to Haruaki, in a certain sense, you have the right to participate in this 'who can make the shameless brat the most happy' contest—In other words... Umm... I know that for you, this would be like a gesture of kindness for the enemy, but even so... If... If possible—"

While saying this, Fear once again realized it was an unreasonable request. If their positions were reversed, Fear would certainly refuse in Kirika's place. Only one person was eligible to satisfy Haruaki the most and receive the best return gift. Who would want to increase the number of opponents?

Nevertheless, Kirika agreed with unexpected readiness after listening to Fear's request:

"No problem."

"I-It's really okay?"

"Yes, unless you don't want me, please allow me to help."

"But... As weird as it is for me to say this, I will be absorbing knowledge and skills seriously, so serious that even dry rice crackers would turn into wet ones. If you intend to participate in the contest, then you'll basically be helping the enemy—"

"Don't worry, I don't intend to compete."

Kirika interrupted Fear and murmured. Then she repeated herself softly.

With an inexplicably lonely smile—As though speaking to herself.

"That's right... I have absolutely... no intention of competing..."

Chapter 1 - Stomach Clock and Chocolate Time / "Study for Saint Valentine's Day"

Part 1

"Let me make myself clear, I'm just going out to play next! There's absolutely nothing else going on or any secret purpose, so don't mind me at all!"

It was Sunday afternoon. After lunch, while the Yachi living room was shrouded in a lazy atmosphere, Fear changed to go out and made a loud announcement. Naturally, what Haruaki needed to do was not simply seeing her off, waving goodbye and saying: "Take care." Narrowing his eyes, he asked:

"Hey... What are your intentions?"

"I-I don't have any intentions. I'll curse you! It's like... purely a stroll, nothing more!"

"Oh okay, a stroll? Then lemme come along."

"N-No way! Today's stroll involves... Umm—Oh right, trying clothes! Like trying on underwear in a clothing store, there's a whole bunch of boring activities! The schedule is completely packed! If you want to take a stroll with me, that'll mean you finally admit to being a shameless brat, planning to do shameless things! No more shamelessness! Shoo! Shoo!"

Fear made a gesture as though driving a puppy away. Then she looked up at the living room clock with sudden alarm.

"Muu! It's this late already because of too much talking! I'll be late unless I hurry—So, I'll be taking a stroll alone, without being suspicious at all! Definitely back before dinner!"

Before Haruaki could stop her, Fear had already run outside. Soon after, the sound of the main door being opened and closed frantically was heard. With that, peace and quiet returned to the living room once more.

"What's going on? It's better to chase her straight away, right...?"

"Hmm, it should be fine. Lately, she looks like she's getting quite used to this city, so she shouldn't be doing anything too weird."

Sip~ Konoha spoke as she drank her tea. How odd, Haruaki thought. Normally, Konoha would be the first to keep Fear under strict monitoring instead.

"Maybe... Hmm~ Although she's always like this, it's worrying if we can't contact her when something happens. I should have asked her to take a cellphone with her."

"Just buy one for her. I'll help sponsor part of the cost."

Rolling about on the tatami floor, Kuroe spoke in a lively tone of voice. The Dan-no-ura beauty parlor was still open for business today, but Kuroe was taking a break for almost an hour, making a

visit home for lunch. Although it saved the cost of buying lunch, conversely, she also lost an opportunity to pull in more customers. Haruaki felt that it was a bit pointless. Especially since it happened to be Sunday as well.

"Buying a cellphone for her is fine, but the phone plan is a problem~ I'll have to do some calculations next time and see."

"It's too early to buy a phone for that child. In any case, she won't be out of contact today, so you don't have to worry too much."

Konoha simply closed her eyes while enjoying her tea. What was going on?

"Konoha, you know where Fear went?"

"I can hazard a guess. But due to certain reasons, I've decided not to tell you, Haruaki-kun."

"What?"

"Kono-san, Kono-san, then could you tell me?"

Kuroe turned her body on the tatami floor and rolled over to Konoha's feet under the table. Konoha sighed lightly and whispered something into the ear of Kuroe who was using her lap as a pillow. Next, Kuroe rolled back out from under the table.

"Oh~ I see I see, I get it now. Looks like things are getting very interesting."

"You really can't tell me?"

"Secret~ Mufufu, don't worry, you'll find out eventually. In fact, Haru might very well have forgotten this by then... You'll definitely be more happy if you forget."

For some reason, Kuroe glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall while smiling profoundly.

"Hmm~? What on earth is going on...?"

To be frank, Haruaki was completely lost, tilting his head alone in bewilderment.

Part 2

While continually referring to a memo throughout her journey, Fear finally reached her destination, an apartment building. Following the instructions given beforehand, she keyed the room number into the panel at the entrance. The automatic door opened simultaneously as the occupant's voice was heard. Truly high tech indeed.

Using the brand new elevator to travel up to the predetermined floor, Fear lingered a little in the spotlessly clean corridor where not a trace of rubbish could be found, before finally finding the target room. She could not help but feel excited as she pressed the intercom—Soon after, the door to the flat opened.

"Hi Fear-kun, welcome."

"Kirika, I have arrived! Today I'll be relying on you!"

Led by Kirika, Fear entered the flat. This was her first time to visit a home known as an apartment so it felt very refreshing for her. The interior was not as cramped as she expected, but since she had no idea what an average apartment was like, it was quite possible that this apartment was more high-class than average.

"So... Did you bring what I asked you to buy?"

"Of course. After all, I'm the one who asked you to instruct me, so just leave the little things to me. Let's see... Chocolate bars... Is this enough?"

Fear had made a shopping stop at a convenience store along the way just now. Peering into the plastic bag Fear had handed over, Kirika nodded.

"Yes, that should be enough."

"Great. But to be honest, this is quite different from what I imagined from the word 'handmade'... Because this is already chocolate."

"After all, you can't really start making it from cocoa beans. Don't worry, this still counts as being handmade."

Kirika placed the chocolate bars on the table. Suddenly, she remembered something and looked up:

"By the way, let's first make an important decision... What are you planning on making?"

"You're asking me what I'm making...? Of course it's chocolate!"

"I know that... What I mean is what kind of chocolate... Oh, let's have a look online."

Kirika opened up the notebook computer on the desk and typed in some words. Instantly, the screen displayed a colorful website (probably).

"Although they all fall under the umbrella category of chocolate, there is actually a diverse variety of types. Also, you don't have to give chocolate for Valentine's Day. Chocolate cakes are fine too."

"What, it turns out to be like that!? Muuumuumuu..."

Fear frowned and stared intently at the computer screen. This looked like a website with a special feature introducing Valentine's Day. On it was written the advertising slogan: "With this, you can capture your beloved's heart!" At the same time, many photos were published of all sorts of chocolate confectionery.

"Uuumuu~ All of them look quite tasty. Mmm... Huh!? No wait, now's not the time to be drooling. I'm looking at them to decide which type I'm making."

"Did you find a type you like?"

"If I had to say it, I like all of them."

"I-I see..."

After a while of continuously browsing through the confectionery photos, Fear suddenly realized something.

"By the way, Kirika, what are you planning to make? Duplicating would be bad, right?"

"...I haven't decided yet, so you don't need to worry about me."

"Hmm, then there's no problem."

So, what should I make? The problem is what would the shameless brat be the most happy to eat—No wait, I seem to be getting ahead of myself. After all, it's my first time making chocolate. There's no need to finish in one go the chocolate I'm going to give to Haruaki. I should use today's opportunity to prioritize improving my skills first. That's right, there's still some time before Valentine's Day, so I just need to decide before then... Yes, that'll be the plan.

"Okay. Anyway, I just wanna use today for increasing my chocolate-making experience. I'm sorry, Kirika, but could you help me pick a type of chocolate from all these choices, something that even a novice can make?"

"In other words, let's practice first. What a great idea. Then how about this—ganache? I think it'll help you get a feel for what chocolate is like after you reprocess it manually."

Kirika operated the mouse and clicked a photo, popping up a webpage that showed a recipe.

"Okay—Let's start with that! Fufu, this is the first step towards 30000yen's worth of rice crackers!"

Even as a novice currently, I am definitely more perfect and competent than that Cow Tits. All I need to do is train diligently from this point onwards to improve my skills. When the real contest is here, I'll surely surpass her. In other words, victory is already 80% in my hands now. Hence, Fear believed with great certainty:

(I'm winning for sure...!)

What sort of expression would Haruaki make when receiving her chocolate and how awesome a return gift was he going to give back?

Simply the thought of that was enough to seriously fill Fear with incomparable anticipation.

Part 3

February 14 arrived.

"Whew~ What nice tea..."

As usual, Haruaki was sitting in the Yachi home's veranda, his eyes half closed like an old man while drinking tea. After making sure no one else was around, Fear slowly approached him from behind.

"Hey."

"Yeah, what's up?"

A familiar idiotic expression. Fear inexplicably felt her heart racing while she shoved to Haruaki the bag she had been holding behind her back.

"For you. Because it's... Valentine's Day. It's basically a thank you gift for your everyday care."

"Eh? Really? I'm so happy... No way, you made it yourself?"

"That's right, I put my very heart and soul into it."

"Amazing. I'm so touched... Can I eat it?"

"Ch-Chocolate is meant to be eaten, it's not like it's for decoration. Of course you can."

"Haha, but in my view, I'd rather put it up as decoration to commemorate this."

Haruaki took out the chocolate from the paper bag and picked up a piece. Staring at the chocolate, he seemed to take a gulp. Was he worried...? No, it must be because it looks too tasty so he could not wait to let his tongue savor the sweet and wonderful taste. Definitely without a doubt.

"Okay, I'm gonna start."

Haruaki announced carefully and placed the piece of chocolate in his mouth. Fear watched the scene unfold without blinking at all

. No problem, it was definitely going to be fine. Because she had worked so hard. And she definitely tasted it.

Suddenly, Haruaki froze. What? Did it taste bad? Impossible...!

Just as Fear's heart raced wildly—

"D-Delicious! Too delicious—! So delicious that even a three-star pastry chef would be forced to make a barefooted escape!"

"Nyowow!"

Haruaki abruptly hugged her. Because it was too sudden, Fear made a strange sound.

"Ah... Hey Haruaki, you shameless brat! Let me go now... I-I'll... curse you...!"

"It's super delicious! Really super delicious, Fear! It's way better than what Konoha gave me!"

"R-Really? Good to know—H-Hey, I got the message, okay, stop rubbing your face in that kind of place..."

"Oh sorry sorry, I got carried away in a moment of excitement. So, I'm giving you a return gift for White Day! Here you go, 30000yen's worth of rice crackers! Eat as much as you want today!"

"Really!?"

With a shameless expression on his face, Haruaki took out a bag of rice crackers from somewhere and handed it reverently to Fear. Only now did she just notice that Haruaki was so touched that tears were streaming all over his face.

The characters bearing 'thirty thousand' were carved on each piece of rice cracker. These rice crackers were not worth 30000yen each, were they? To think one could eat their fill of such high-class rice crackers. Fear sat down on the veranda and opened the bag of rice crackers. Instantly, an intense aroma drifted out. She picked up a piece and took a bite. As though freshly baked, the rice cracker gave off a delightful crunch. Then an indescribably complex and concentrated flavor began to spread from her tongue—Nothing less expected from 30000yen rice crackers, so delicious, completely out of this world!

Fear kept eating, wolfing them down ravenously, her hands unable to pause for even an instant.

"Oh... Ohoh... So happy... I'm so extremely happy...!"

"Really? That's wonderful, I've very happy too."

She looked at Haruaki beside her, feeling her heart racing even faster. He was smiling as usual, sitting next to her, drinking tea with a gentle smile on his face. After watching for a while, Fear felt a sense of discomfort in the depths of her heart and could not help but shift her gaze away. Before she knew it, she had already

picked up the cup before her and was drinking tea in an attempt to calm her emotions. On this calm and peaceful veranda, the two of them were alone, drinking tea together.

"Uh... What should I say, basically..."

Fear was hesitant, unsure of what she should say. At this moment, she suddenly felt bad about hogging these delicious rice crackers all to herself.

"Oh yeah! I-It's all because you're staring at me with such greedy eyes, fine, I'll give you a piece at least. This is... really... very tasty... Munch munch munch."

Fear chewed a rice cracker while shoving another piece towards Haruaki. He smiled gently and said:

"Thank you. However, what delights me the most is seeing you so happy. No need for a whole piece, just giving half will do. So—*Here I go.*"

"...!"

Fear held her breath. Haruaki's face gradually occupied her entire field of view. Haruaki... Ahhh, Haruaki—He was currently bringing his lips towards her, *biting the other end of the rice cracker sticking out her mouth.*

"Nyo, wah...!"

"Ahhh... Truly... so delicious..."

Crunch, crunch.

Separated by nothing but a rice cracker, Haruaki's face was right before her eyes. While chewing the rice cracker, he slowly drew his lips closer to Fear. Her heart raced uncontrollably. Crunch. Halfway point surpassed. Hold it. Wait, Haruaki, if you keep on eating, your lips... Your lips... Will touch with mine—

At this moment, Fear suddenly regained her senses.

"Nuoooooooooooooooooh!?"

"F-Fear-kun, what's the matter?"

"H-Huff... W-What's going on, what did I just do...?"

Panting, Fear looked all around her. Oddly enough, her memories were in total chaos. This place was—that's right—the kitchen at Kirika's home. In order to make chocolate for Valentine's Day, she had asked Kirika to be her coach and instructor. Then making her first visit to Kirika's home, she had decided to start with making something simple—

"Fear-kun, are you alright...?"

"O-Of course I'm alright. Absolutely alright. I just spaced out for a moment there. Uh, no, I suddenly just felt like screaming out once..."

"...Very well. It's very dangerous if you move carelessly when holding a kitchen knife."

Speaking of which—Fear looked down at her hands. She was holding a kitchen knife. On the kitchen counter was a cutting board with chocolate bars on top. Under Kirika's tutelage, she was currently performing the step of cutting the chocolate into small pieces. After coughing drily once, Fear focused her attention again.

"I must focus... There's no time for spacing out. Cut cut..."

Fear returned to her original task, producing a drumming sound while she chopped away with the kitchen knife in an unrefined manner. Her movements were unrefined because she was not used to handling a kitchen knife. This could not be helped. Absolutely, this was not because she was venting her anger or trying to hide her embarrassment.

A certain matter suddenly awakened in her mind, one that she had been pondering for a long time now. Fear could feel her cheeks turning red. At the same time, she swung the kitchen knife even more violently.

Strange, this really was too strange.

She was simply giving chocolate to him out of gratitude for taking care of her on a daily basis. She was doing all this out of a very practical wish: giving better chocolate than Cow Tits, making Cow Tits recognize her ability, and while she was at it, receive the best return gift from Haruaki.

That was obviously the situation here.

—Then why was she having such weird delusions?

Part 4

Kirika looked up from the sheet of paper where the recipe was printed and glanced at Fear. The way Fear was chopping with the knife really looked as though she were venting her anger. She also made a strange scream suddenly just now. Did something happen?

(Valentine's Day... huh...)

Busy thinking over other matters recently, Kirika had temporarily prevented herself from pondering this lively festival—However, it could very well be time that she started making preparations.

Preparing... Courtesy chocolate.

(That's right... I... have no intention of competing.)

But it would be a lie to say that she had not considered the possibility of handing over a different type of chocolate. She had considered it. Of course she did. Yes, she admitted it openly to herself. After all, even that rotten older brother knew already, hence she had long gone past the point of denial—

She... loved him.

However, so what? She was unable to give chocolate to him that harbored this level of significance.

She had considered that option already, but she was the one who ruled it out.

Perfectly natural. No way. Impossible. Because there was no way. Because it was impossible.

All she permitted was imagination alone. What did it matter? From the moment this body was enveloped in a curse, the moment she was forced to wear *this*, she had already abandoned all sorts of things. For someone like her, imagination alone was more than enough. Simply keeping him in her thoughts was more than enough.

Seriously? Kirika asked herself.

She closed her eyes lightly and answered sincerely from the heart.

Yes—Seriously.

Kirika decided to hand over her chocolate on the roof. On that day of the cultural festival, she had created a little happy memory that she probably would not forget for the rest of her life. This memory of the "first time" that she had stolen while he was asleep

"Class Rep, what's up? Why did you ask me to come here?"

"No... Nothing important. It's just that it might cause other people to have all sorts of unnecessary misunderstandings if they saw, which would cause you all sorts of trouble, so... Umm... Anyway, here you go! This is for you! Hmph! Seriously, how absolutely ridiculous!"

She shoved her handmade chocolate into his chest. He stared slightly wide-eyed and accepted the chocolate. He seemed quite surprised—Indeed, to think an uncute girl like her would give chocolate to him, surely it must be quite unexpected. She must view herself realistically.

Since she had delivered the gift already, there was nothing more to do. Kirika quickly walked over to the roof entrance and said:

"Of course, although it's so absolutely ridiculous that I shouldn't need to say this. Don't get the wrong idea, this is courtesy chocolate."

"Courtesy... huh?"

He murmured softly in serious tone of voice. There was a hint of regret mixed in his voice, why?

Kirika could not help but pause in her steps. From behind came the following words:

"Really... What a shame."

"A shame... What?"

"In other words, I really hope it's not courtesy chocolate. Oh well, I'll just say it directly. I actually—you, Class Rep..."

She turned around. Then his voice jumped into her ear.

"...Yes."

Incomprehensible. She clearly heard beyond a doubt but could not understand his words. How could that be possible? Absolutely ridiculous. Impossible. That sort of thing... That sort of thing—

No wait, let me confirm again. What did you just say?

"I said, I—you, Class Rep."

"Y-You're lying."

Her voice was trembling extremely as though it were not her own voice.

Approaching step by step, he spoke with a very sincere voice and a very serious expression.

"It's true, I've always wanted to be together with you, Class Rep."
"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous... D-Don't joke around. Th-That kind of thing, who would believe—"

"Then if I do this, will you believe me?"

While saying that, he embraced her tightly from the front.

"Ah...!"

An electrical current rushed through her brain, instantly short circuiting all thoughts, memories and emotions. Her heart raced insanely. Body temperature. His body temperature was mixing with hers. Breathing, breathing, breathing breathing breathing.

Kirika forcibly suppressed the urge to give in completely to him and squeezed her voice out:

"N-No way. I..."

"Of course it's okay. Of course you can, Class Rep."

A gentle voice. His arms tightened around her, pressing her body against his especially broad chest. A sense of comfort. A sense of comfort that she absolutely could not accept. In order to maintain her identity. The sensation of the thing under her uniform was probably being transmitted to him through his embrace.

"N-No way, really no way... Did you forget? I... am cursed. Is this really okay? You can't accept it, right? I... No matter what, cannot take this off, so..."

Raising her trembling arms, she tried to push him away, but to no avail. Instead, his hands moved gently over her back in a soothing manner, following the lines of that cursed bondage suit, touching her neck, then lightly lifting up her skirt—

"I don't mind."

"H-How could you... not mind. I can't take it off. At all times, during all activities, no exceptions. Even when taking a bath, also, umm..."

"I really don't mind. Simply being with you like this, Class Rep, makes me very happy. And even if you're wearing a bondage suit, I don't mind either. No, if anything..."

"I-If anything... What...?"

Her mind began to grow hazy. His face was up close, right before her eyes. Serious yet gentle, his face displayed the confidence to accept everything about her. It was okay? It was really okay? Entrusting everything of hers to this guy?

Then he spoke in a voice without any ambiguity at all:

"To be honest—This is even more *arousing*."

"Ah..."

Under her uniform, she heard the sound of «Gimestorante's Love» being unzipped somewhere.

Ahhh, oh no. Oh no. In this manner... In this manner...

"A-Absolutely ridiculous..."

All she could muster was a powerless murmur like this.

In the next instant, her arms gradually lost the strength to resist

At this moment, Kirika suddenly regained her senses.

"Nyaaaaaaaaah!"

"K-Kirika, what's with you!?"

Kirika tore up the recipe on the paper in her hands and scrunched the pieces into a ball. Then she threw it into the nearby trash can with all the brute force she could muster. Next, she laid herself on the table and performed a forceful bear hug on the surface—Were Fear not present, she would surely have banged her head repeatedly against the table. Die! I should go and die!

"Huff, huff... W-Why... would this happen to me...!?"

"H-Hey, Kirika, are you okay?"

As soon as her emotions calmed down—even though her heart was still beating rapidly—Kirika looked up. Currently cutting chocolate with the kitchen knife, Fear was watching her with a puzzled look. How embarrassing. How embarrassing to the extreme.

"N-No... It's nothing... at all."

"Your weird sound and behavior don't look like it's nothing. Are you okay? You even tore up the recipe."

"I-Is that so? I'm really sorry for scaring you. Just now, that was.. That... Yes! A memorizing technique! It's like erasing something from a set of cue cards. In other words, now that I've already memorized the contents of this recipe, I secure the memory in my mind completely by throwing the recipe away!"

"I've never heard of that kind of technique before... That's probably why you get such good grades on tests. On the other hand, I think it'd be more easy to forget since you can't refer to it and check anymore, but if you say so, it must be true. Lemme try it out next time I have a test."

The forced excuse apparently worked, just barely. Although Fear was tilting her head in puzzlement, she still turned her gaze back to the cutting board.

How unbelievable. Kirika really could not believe herself. Ahhh , seriously—

Why was she having such weird delusions?

How absolutely ridiculous.

Part 5

Fear and Kirika were in the living room, trying out the ganache they had finished making.

"Wow! Although it still tastes like chocolate, it's very thick! This texture is totally new for me!"

"Thick...?"

While stuffing the ganache into her mouth, Fear could see from the corner of her eye that Kirika was tilting her head in puzzlement. Delicious. Fear never expected the first chocolate she made in her life to be so tasty... As expected of herself. Fear knew she had cooking talent in herself after all. Yes, although the shape was a little off, that was something that would come with practice. Probably.

"Chew chew. Ah, why am I the only one eating? Kirika, you should eat some as well. It came out this tasty only because you were teaching me!"

"Haha, then I'll try one. Hmm, it's really quite good."

"But excellent taste aside, it's still a bit too simple. As for whether it'll make Haruaki ecstatic when he receives it... Or rather, can it defeat Cow Tits... What do you think?"

"That's because you're just practicing basic skills for today. Now that you're able to make ganache for sure, you can combine with other ingredients to make all kinds of chocolates, such as truffles."

"Hmm, I think I've heard that name before. It seems to be something pricey."

"You're thinking of a different kind of truffle..."

Then let's try making that truffle thingy—Although this crossed Fear's mind, she was feeling hungry now that her stomach

was stimulated by the chocolate's sweetness. Looking at the wall clock, she saw that it was already the time when Haruaki would start preparing dinner at home. Her stomach clock was apparently quite accurate.

"I guess we're out of time today since I said I'd be home before dinner. If possible—Can I visit again? I'd like you to teach me more."

"Of course. You're welcome to come any time."

Kirika replied with a smile. Seeing as that was the case, Fear felt relieved and popped another piece of ganache into her mouth. Lemme go home after finishing this piece. I'll leave the rest for Kirika as a thank you gift.

"Okay, I'd better get going." Saying that, Fear got up and was about to walk to the door when—

"By the way... Fear-kun, umm... I have something to tell you."

"Oh, what is it? Is it about what kind of chocolate we're making next time?"

"No, this has nothing to do with Valentine's Day... However..."

Stuttering, her eyes wandering, Kirika seemed to want to say something but was hesitant. Next, she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, turning her gaze down while entering deep thought. Fear inclined her head and waited for Kirika to continue, but—

"No... I guess I really should mention this when everyone is present. Also, that girl needs to be there too..."

Kirika murmured to herself and concluded on her own. Shaking her head lightly, she said:

"Sorry. I'll tell you tomorrow—during the lunch break. Don't worry about it."

"I don't really get it at all but anyway, see you tomorrow. You really helped me a lot today, thank you."

"Don't mention it, I had fun too. You're welcome to visit again any time."

After waving goodbye to each other, Fear walked out of the apartment. While making her way towards the elevator lobby, Fear suddenly wondered.

(Just now, Kirika was making a very serious expression. What happened...?)

No amount of pondering would obtain the answer. Yes, after all, since Kirika was going to tell her tomorrow, there was no point worrying over it. All she needed to do was listen to what Kirika wanted to tell them tomorrow and devote herself to helping out if possible.

Fear nodded on her own and entered the elevator that happened to stop on this floor.

Then in her haste to hurry home for dinner, she pressed the button for the ground floor repeatedly.

Part 6

The next day was Monday. After finishing their lunch, Haruaki and company were called by Kirika to the roof. Probably due to the chilly weather of January, no one was in the mood for lunch on the roof. Apart from Haruaki's group, no other students could be seen.

"Eh? Class Rep still isn't here?"

"I think she said she had something else to do first. Anyway, let's wait until she arrives."

"Yes, but the weather is a bit chilly. Should we go buy a few cans of hot tea?"

Haruaki, Fear and Konoha waited for a while on the chilly roof

"...Sorry for making you wait."

"Oh, it's you, Class Rep. It's okay, but what do you want to talk about... Eh?"

Halfway in his sentence, Haruaki suddenly fell silent. Behind Kirika was yet another figure. Kirika looked back over her shoulder, threw a glance at the girl and said:

"I'm late because I needed to get this girl. The next step requires her presence."

"My question: Asking what is the unknown matter. Because of this, I am unable to leisurely enjoy that most tasty food—meat bun."

Someone was eating meat buns for lunch at school? Was she ignoring the school rule that prohibited going out during break in order to buy meat buns at the convenience store outside? Or did she simply bring them to school as her lunch? ...Despite these many questions, Haruaki decided to put them aside for now. The person before them was undoubtedly Un Izoey. The one feeling the most wary about her should be Kirika, so why bring her here?

In any case, the group first sat down in a circle. Konoha and Kirika were kneeling on floor with their knees together, but Fear was sitting casually with her knees drawn up to her chest while Un Izoey sat cross-legged. Haruaki really wished the latter two could be slightly more aware of the fact that they were wearing skirts.

"Next, I wish to hold a discussion—rather, an announcement meeting. Frankly speaking, I should have brought this up sooner. I am truly sorry for not telling everyone until now. Although even if I didn't mention it, you'll probably find out from the superintendent's side soon... However, I should be the one explaining this matter."

"Uh... What is it?"

Kirika's tone of voice suddenly became very serious. Although Haruaki was unsure of what she wanted to talk about exactly, he had a vague feeling. Lately, what frequently occupied Kirika's mind was definitely this matter.

Very seriously, Kirika swept her gaze across everyone. Then she spoke:

"Simply stated... *It's about the mathematics teacher at this school, Himura Sunao.*"

Hearing her suddenly mention this name, Haruaki was quite troubled. Naturally, he recognized this person.

Just as Kirika described, he was a mathematics teacher who also taught Haruaki's class. He was always muttering gloomily, a man with an exceedingly poor sense of presence. Due to his long bangs, his expression was basically never seen clearly. However, he was never witnessed losing his temper. Haruaki's only impression of him was a teacher who taught seriously despite the ghost-like gloomy aura he exuded. Furthermore, he started being hospitalized long term during the second term due to illness and had not returned to school. Why would Kirika mention his name now?

"Class Rep, did something happen to Himura-sensei?"

"Nothing happened in particular. Although I haven't told you all this time... He's actually a member of the Lab Chief's Nation and will be returning to this school soon. What I want to discuss is how to deal with him when the time comes."

"Eh...?"

Kirika continued to explain. Back when she was still a member of the Lab Chief's Nation, Himura-sensei was something like a partner to her. Back when Haruaki and Kirika were abducted by Alice Bivorio Basskreigh, the masked man who had forcibly rescued Kirika and left Haruaki behind was Himura-sensei. Then Kirika had caused a car accident, causing him to be hospitalized ever since—

"The man from that time... was Himura-sensei?"

"Yes. Because I caused him to be hospitalized, there was temporarily no need to worry about his meddling, which is why I delayed the explanation until now... Or rather, I couldn't find a suitable opportunity to explain... In any case, I apologize."

"Hmm, come to think of it, I seem to remember such a teacher, but not really... Or maybe I've no recollection? Anyway, his sense of presence was too weak, I can't quite remember. And he disappeared not long after I transferred in."

"Granted that may be true, you still must have attended his lessons multiple times. Putting that aside, back to Kirika-san, since you say he will return, that means Himura-sensei will be discharged from the hospital soon?"

Hearing Konoha's question, Kirika shook her head.

"No actually, he seems to have left the hospital a while ago. Currently, who knows if he is recuperating at home or still

engaging in new research at the Lab Chief's Nation... However, what is certain is that he will be returning to his post soon. I've asked other teachers and also confirmed with Kaidou-sensei and the superintendent's side."

"What did the superintendent say?"

"With no omissions in procedure, there are no grounds to refuse his return to his teaching post. Although one member of the Lab Chief's Nation has already been accepted, what difference would having two make...? Oh dear, what do you think?"—He acted like it was none of his business. Absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika clicked her tongue disapprovingly while she spoke. Haruaki did not know if it was aimed at the overly laid back superintendent or Himura who was about to return.

"Indeed, what difference would having two make... To be honest, I've no idea, which is why I called this girl here."

Kirika glared at the one person present who had been silent all along. Despite facing Kirika's vicious gaze, she spoke without any change in expression:

"The purpose of this gathering is now known. But I answer by giving this kind of answer: no special change, probably. About the research observations about you, it is now known that a researcher called Himura Sunao will participate, but I have not seen him yet. Neither has special discussion taken place."

Un Izoey spoke while facing Kirika's gaze directly. She did not sound like she was lying. Kirika stared at Un Izoey for quite a while before finally shifting her gaze and murmuring:

"...In that case, fine."

"Uh... I already know that Himura-sensei is from the Lab Chief's Nation. Then according to this girl, even if he intends to return, it looks like he's not planning any special operation... Probably. In that case, what should we do?"

"The way I feel about it, so long as that guy is hospitalized again, I don't care if it takes a sneak attack or something."

That would be too dangerous, right? Haruaki looked towards Kirika. Whether in expression or tone of voice, she was very serious, hence it was even more frightening... Did she really hate Himura that much?

"My statement: if any of you intend to harm a researcher, my coworker, I cannot ignore it for sure."

"Hmph—I'm just kidding. Since you've neither met him for any discussions nor do you have any plans, we're done with you here. We'll handle the rest ourselves."

Kirika ignored Un Izoey and turned to Haruaki's group again.

"Frankly speaking, that guy can't be trusted. Yachi, perhaps you're still able to understand since you're left behind back when we were imprisoned by Bivorio... In any case, that guy is a

quintessential member of the Lab Chief's Nation, motivated by nothing except the prospects of researching the unknown. In this regard, he even rivals Yamimagari Pakuaki."

"If he's on the same level as that guy, that's really quite a problem."

Fear frowned and groaned.

"Yes, that's why I believe you should all be as wary of him as you would against Yamimagari Pakuaki. Stay vigilant at all times and keep away from him. Best to avoid speaking to him. Due to the student-teacher relationship, there may be situations where it's impossible to avoid contact, but never face him alone. Who knows what he could do."

"About you guys, the Lab Chief's current attitude should be observation without undertaking any other research."

"I really wish these words of yours could be believed. How absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika finished and stood up. The meeting was apparently over. Haruaki and his group also got up.

"In any case, don't approach that Himura guy, right? Understood."

"In other words, the people we need to be wary of increased by one. Yes, by this point, there isn't much difference whether it's one or two. In any case, you should maintain the status quo and avoid

doing anything weird. Okay, you'll be late for next period if you don't hurry back."

"Affirmative... My question: is next period Modern Japanese? I confess a confession that I am actually not very good at it."

"There's nothing 'actually,' about it, anyone can tell you're not good at Japanese simply from the way you speak. Please learn proper Japanese faster."

While listening to this exchange, Haruaki walked over to Kirika's side to exit the roof. At this moment, Kirika spoke quietly:

"Sorry, maybe my warnings have raised everyone's alert unnecessarily."

"But Class Rep, you told us only because you believe that we should be wary of that guy. It's okay. Although I don't like suspecting others, it'd be too late if something really happened."

"...That's right. If anything really happened, it'd be too late..."

Kirika glanced sideways at him, her eyes incomparably serious.

"Let me repeat myself, Yachi, you must beware of that man."

"Y-Yes. But compared to me, I guess Fear and Konoha needs to even more..."

"No."

At the same time as her objection, Kirika stopped walking for only an instant.

"Or rather, I should say—You're the one who should take the most precautions against him. So be more careful."

"...?"

Kirika resumed walking, moving even faster than before. When Haruaki stepped onto the staircase leading to the roof, Kirika very quickly passed him.

While Haruaki looked at her back, he seemed to hear a very quiet "sorry."

Hence, during third period a few days later—

"Umm... Hello everyone... It's been quite a while. Sorry for causing everyone trouble all because of my ill health..."

Standing before the lectern was a gloomy and muttering mathematics teacher—Himura Sunao. His long bangs obscured his face, preventing a clear view of his expression. Conversely—actually, that was not aptly put either—In any case, Haruaki turned his head slightly to look at a certain girl sitting nearby.

This girl student's expression was easily read and understood. Kirika was glaring at the teacher sharply, overtly wary of him.

Haruaki turned his eyes again to see Fear staring ahead vigilantly though not to Kirika's level.

"So... I'm quite sorry but please turn to page 180 of the textbook.
.."

Himura did not pay special attention to the two girls and started the lesson as usual. Quiet voice, gloomy tone, excessively weak presence. Haruaki recalled the masked man he met back when Bivorio had kidnapped him. Compared to that man's arrogant tone of voice and attitude, this was worlds apart. Nevertheless—come to think of it, there was a similarity in voice. Definitely for sure.

(But even if she asks me to be careful...)

What could he do exactly? This was an ordinary lesson. A lesson no different from the ones Himura delivered before getting hospitalized.

If anything, only one thing was different.

Namely, no matter how sleep deprived from the previous night, no matter how gloomy the teacher's voice sounded, it looked like Haruaki was not going to be falling asleep, at least in mathematics class.

Part 7

Once returned home, Kirika took a deep breath.

"Nothing happened at all huh..."

Although she still could not relax or stop worrying, at least the first day of Himura's return went by without incident. He had not made any attempt on his own to approach her. Naturally, she did not approach him on her own either. Not even a single word exchanged. Kirika really wished that she would not have to speak with him ever again.

Placing her schoolbag on the table, just as she was thinking "let me get changed first then it's time for homework" and walking towards her wardrobe—Her cellphone rang.

An ominous feeling. After she saw the unfamiliar number displayed on the LCD, this feeling further strengthened.

"...Hello."

"To think you'd put my number on ignore, how terrible. All because of that, I had no choice but to change phone numbers. Hmm, on the other hand, I already expected this beforehand."

Kirika could feel her emotions freezing rapidly, but at the same time, something did not feel right. Something was off.

The voice. It was unlike the arrogant and confident voice he used in the past or the gloomy one heard in the classroom. If anything—It was a normal voice somewhere intermediate.

"What do you want?"

'I can understand why you're so wary of me, but listen to me. I—have decided to change.'

"Change...? Change what?"

'It's very simple. I'm changing my way of life, my way of thinking.'

"Don't make me laugh."

'I'm not joking. Actually, while I was in the hospital, I was scolded by the Lab Chief once. Apparently, I was too coercive in various ways all this time, thus causing you a lot of trouble. Sorry.'

Kirika felt a sense of dizziness. What happened? This man could not possibly be speaking these words.

"Himura, what are you planning?"

'Nothing at all. Hmm, I don't think you'll believe me straight away... However, I just think that I need to inform you first in order to turn over a new leaf.'

"I'm hanging up. I've no interest in chatting with you about such absolutely ridiculous life philosophies. Don't call again."

'Hold on, I've one more thing to say apart from that. Something important—Rather, a request.'

"Your brain must have a problem if you really think I'll listen to your request. You've called the wrong number. Or perhaps, you've even forgotten a three digit number?"

'Sigh...' Himura seemed to sigh lightly on the other end of the line.

'Because you're the only one I can ask. Besides, this is related to you too.'

"Related to me? Absolutely ridiculous, I've already severed all ties to the Lab Chief's Nation completely!"

'I really don't want to say this, because it'll sound like I'm blackmailing you—But I guess it's impossible to communicate otherwise, so I still have to say it. Since you're so smart, you should have an inkling even if I don't say it out. What I mean by 'related,' in other words—'

'This problem, which I'm burdened with, stems entirely from your actions.'

After hearing Himura's words, Kirika understood. With a feeling of despair, she understood.

Precisely. It was related to her. She was responsible.

She had not forgotten. On the other hand, neither had she proactively kept this matter on her mind. How absolutely

ridiculous. Clearly she could not be forgiven for something like that.

Ahhh, this... definitely was...

Absolutely impossible to pretend it never happened—

Her crime.

Part 8

The day after Himura returned to teach at school...

Starting from that morning, Kirika looked very off. Although her wariness against Himura the previous day was not quite normal either, today, she was even more unusual.

Agitated. Somber. Deep in thought. Repeated sighing.

When the lunch break arrived, these symptoms still had not changed—

"Too delicious! This stewed dish is indescribably delicious... Akki, you're basically a mom! Mommy~!"

"Who the heck is Mommy!?"

"Oh my! It's because my mom is not very good at Japanese cooking! But her stews are lovely."

"Hey Kana, this roasted fish is very good too. The saltiness is perfect!"

The usual lunch duel. Claiming to be taste testing, Kana and Taizou kept using their chopsticks to pick up food from Haruaki's lunchbox as usual. However—

"So, how about the challenger, Kirika-chan? Eh? Hey Kirika-chan~?"

Kirika turned out to be still spacing out. Haruaki, Taizou, Kana, as well as Fear, who was wolfing down a lunchbox identical to Haruaki's, looked at one another. Soon after—

"Huh... W-What?"

"What do you mean, what~? Kirika-chan, aren't you going to eat lunch?"

"W-Well, eat? Of course I'm eating. But, ah..."

Kirika opened the lid of her lunchbox and stopped. "?" Haruaki and everyone else looked inside.

"Hamburg steak, shumai pork dumplings, cellophane noodles, bean curd skin sushi...? Uh, though it does look very tasty."

"But it looks kind of like a mixed bag... Kirika-chan, aren't you having a lunch duel as usual?"

Taizou and Kana's comments prompted Kirika to turn her gaze away as though trying to hide something:

"That's because... This morning... I didn't know what she wanted to eat... N-No, not that. Umm... I was too careless. Sorry. So please, let's have a truce for today's lunch duel."

"Yeah, we don't mind at all. To think you'd carelessly make this kind of mistake, that's quite unusual for you, Class Rep."

"...I'm like this occasionally. Please don't worry about it."

Taizou and the rest were tilting their heads in puzzlement while Kirika sluggishly started to eat her lunch. For sure, something was not quite right.

Quite concerned, Haruaki decided to talk to Kirika discreetly after they finished eating lunch. Fear also shifted her chair noisily and moved next to Kirika's seat.

"Hey, Kirika, what happened?"

"I'm finding you spacing out all day today... Is this related to Himura-sensei in some way...?"

Haruaki lowered his voice and asked. Kirika was in the process of preparing her textbooks for next period. Her shoulder shook but she said:

"No... Nothing at all."

"Then did some other problem happen? After all, I owe you a ton of favors, I'll help you anytime! All you need to do is ask! Come, tell me! Don't hold back!"

Kirika's lips curled up. This was probably the first time she smiled today, albeit a little weakly.

"Thank you. Well... To be honest... It's because I currently need to handle a certain matter that I'm not used to, so... I'm a bit exhausted. That's all."

"A matter you're not used to...?"

"Nothing major. Yes, seriously... It's nothing important."

Then what was it? Haruaki was just about to pursue the matter when the bell rang for class to begin. "Time for class, so hurry back to your seat." Kirika ended the conversation with a remark very typical of a class representative's.

(Hmm...?)

Left with no choice, Haruaki returned to his seat. Naturally, he remained unconvinced but there was no way he could ignore the lesson to continue questioning. Yes, I'll just have to ask her discreetly after school—Thinking that to himself, Haruaki began his afternoon lessons...

But as soon as school finished, Kirika grabbed her schoolbag and rushed out of the classroom.

"Oh my? Looks like she's rushing off in quite a hurry... Is it related to what she mentioned at lunch? Haruaki, did she tell you anything else after that?"

"Nope. It's really quite weird~"

"I think so too. But Kirika is a smart person. If she ran into a problem she can't handle on her own, she'll definitely discuss with us... I think I can assume this kind of deep and trusting relationship. Conversely, if it's no big deal, she's not going to go out of her way to explain to us."

"Maybe. But it's really quite concerning... Let's ask her again tomorrow."

Haruaki conversed with Fear while packing his things to go home, then exited the classroom.

However—His plan was easily foiled.

Because Kirika was absent from school the next day.

Part 9

After school, Haruaki and company were walking on the streets in their school uniforms.

"I asked the teacher and heard that she contacted the school and apparently asked for sick leave due to a flu."

"A flu... huh...? Last time when she got drunk, she did mention that her resistance towards internal maladies isn't as strong, so it's possible, but still..."

Fear offered her findings to which Konoha responded with her head tilted, not entirely convinced.

"In any case, since it's only an ordinary flu, we're just making an ordinary patient visit. Just consider it something along those lines. If it turns out not to be a flu but some other problem, we'll just deal with it when the time comes."

"I think that's overthinking things too much... No matter what other important matters there may be, I don't think Class Rep will skip school by feigning illness. She definitely has a flu. Anyway, I bought some sports drinks and other stuff for the visit, but is that enough? After all, Class Rep lives alone, so perhaps I should buy some ingredients for cooking porridge."

"This should be fine, right? She knows how to cook as well, so at least there should be rice ready at home usually. I remember there were eggs in the fridge too—"

"Hmm? How do you know what's inside Class Rep's fridge, Fear?"

"N-No, I mean that most fridges at least have eggs in them—It's a prediction, a prediction! I definitely did not sneak away to visit Kirika's house because of something I can't tell you about!"

Despite saying that, Fear was moving along the route to Kirika's apartment without any hesitation at all. Yes, I'm not together with

Fear all day long after all. It's very likely that she once ran over to play at Class Rep's home without my knowing. Don't worry about it.

While walking with the rustling plastic bag of visiting gifts, Haruaki soon arrived at the apartment where Kirika lived. Another resident happened to be returning home so Haruaki's group followed him through the automatically locked entrance to enter the apartment's lobby and take the elevator.

"Wow~ What a beautiful apartment, it looks so expensive..."

"Hmph hmph, you're shocked, right?"

"Why are you acting so smug?"

"Uh... Hmm, it's this one, right? I'm pressing the button."

Ding dong—Haruaki pressed the intercom. Frantic footsteps could be heard from inside the unit, then the door opened extremely slowly, as though the occupant was peeking at the situation outside.

"Wha... I-It's you guys!"

"H-Hi."

"Sorry for disturbing you so suddenly. Uh..."

"Kirika, we visited to see how you're feeling! Shouldn't you be lying down and resting?"

Answering the door, Kirika was dressed in casual clothing instead of her pajamas. She looked fine and definitely did not resemble a patient.

Kirika stared wide-eyed but soon exhaled as though surrendering.

"Really? Right, because I said I had a flu. Clearly, I should have known you guys would likely visit me. Indeed, my brain currently isn't working very well... Absolutely ridiculous..."

"Class Rep, no way—You're... feigning sickness?"

"Yes. Looks like it's impossible to hide things any longer. No, I should have expected it from the start... I've been thinking I'd explain to you guys later. It's just that I need mental preparation."

"I don't quite get what you're saying... But you must have encountered some kind of problem, right? It must be the 'certain matter' you mentioned at lunch yesterday."

"Problem? You're right, there is indeed a problem."

"If there's any way we can help, we'll definitely help. Anyway, please explain first."

"Of course I'll explain. Also, I'm obliged to explain. Because this is my crime. But it's quite related to you guys too... But first of all, I think it'd be faster if you saw for your own eyes instead of listening to me explain."

Kirika opened the door wide, presumably inviting them inside.

Compared to the last time Haruaki visited—in other words, the time he brought Kirika home after she fainted—not much had changed. Last time, he had seen Kirika on the bed in a state that was equivalent to being nude from her perspective. As the image surfaced in his mind, Haruaki frantically drove it away.

But... Letting us see for ourselves would be faster? What was going on? What was in the apartment? The reason for Kirika's unusual behavior. Matter. Problem. As well as—Crime.

What was she referring to? What would it be?

Haruaki's group gulped as they walked towards the living room.

Then—They saw it.

They stopped breathing. Instantly, the sight before them felt surreal.

Incomprehensible. Everything was incomprehensible. Too unexpected and unbelievable.

Nothing except questions surfaced in Haruaki's mind.

Why was this here?

Why—*Still alive?*

The window curtain was drawn. Streaming through the curtain, a faint orange glow illuminated the entity in the room hazily.

It was a wheelchair.

On it, a girl sat there, completely motionless.

A slim girl, dressed in a loose-fitting dress resembling a hospital gown, with a head of faded, white hair, wrapped in white bandages the same color as her hair—

"Y-You are..."

Fear could be heard calling out the girl's name in a trembling voice.

—Mummy Maker.



Chapter 2 - Two Minutes on the Pocket Watch / "The place where heart is"

Part 1

Ultimately—

On that day when she first visited, that place where she knew not a single soul except one, the person she selected as the first person to speak to—was simply due to the fact that their ages were the closest, probably.

Despite being closest in age, she was just a middle schooler who had yet to develop a sense of judgment whereas he was a university student. But back at the time, he had already earned all the necessary credits and seldom attended university. For her to feel that they were similar in age even though they were still many years apart, surely it must have been because all the other people present seemed too mature to her.

In a corner of the research facility, she was looking all around her uneasily. Whenever a person in a lab coat passed by, she would look at them in panic as though wanting to say something but always ended up bowing her head, too afraid to speak. Then she would survey her surroundings again—Repeating ad infinitum.

But just as he passed in front of her, she finally—

"E-Excuse me!"

"—What is it?"

"I-I'm sorry, I'm lost... C-Could you give me directions?"

Instantly, he felt intrigued. Why would she be lost? Was this her first time here? She was far too young to be a new researcher. Although he had heard that the organization leader was both a genius and an eccentric, often hiring talent without regard to age—Even so, she was far too young. That said, he was also quite young himself.

However, all these unknowns instantly became known after hearing the location she wanted to reach.

"The Lab Chief's office...? I see now, you're the Lab Chief's little sister? I've heard of you. Let me lead you there."

"Th-Thank you. I was with Onii-chan until just now, but we got separated..."

Relieved, she exhaled and smiled.

An honest and innocent smile.

In that very instant, he thought to himself—How different.

She was different from everyone else here: the researchers who spent their days with scowling or frivolous expressions on their face, consumed in their thoughts on how to conquer the unknown. Also different from those he had met so far: sycophantic friends who approached him due to his excellent academic standing and

reputation as a genius (though inferior to the Lab Chief) or women who sought either money, future influence or his body.

While feeling the smile directed at him from behind, he advanced. Definitely not the talkative type, nevertheless, he decided that walking in silence would not be good, so he spoke up:

"...What kind of research do you intend to undertake from now on?"

He thought it was a perfectly normal question. After all, this place was a research facility.

However, unbelievably, she responded with silence. After a while, she finally spoke, a little troubled:

"I... 'm not too sure."

"Not sure?"

"That's right. What should I do? What can I do... I'm still... not too sure."

She must be feeling worried, he thought. About what she should be and the point of her existence henceforth.

"I came over for a look because Onii-chan invited me... But, uh... I don't dislike studying, but I'm nowhere was amazing as Onii-chan... Uh..."

While she spoke, the content of her words became fragmented. He sighed.

"There's no one in this world who's as amazing as your brother. He is a true genius. Of course, I can't imitate him either... Hence, there's no need to try to be like him."

"...Eh?"

"Just start with things that you're able to do. In other words, this is equivalent to turning the unknown of 'what am I unable to do?' into something known... Impatience is a serious impediment to research."

Even he knew that this was not something he would normally say. He was not trying to comfort her. Neither was he trying to lecture her as a senior. Just that—Knowing the expression of innocence she was displaying behind him, he felt extremely uncomfortable.

He scratched his head and tried to calm his emotions. As it so happened, there was a drink vending machine right on the side. Inserting some change, he bought a can of coffee. After a merely a second's hesitation, he inserted more change and randomly pressed a button—Then turning around, he shoved the second can to the girl.

"Drink. Essentially, everyone here is quite cold. There won't be a welcome party. Consider this a substitute."

Only blinking, she accepted the can. Then as though releasing all the emotions she had penned up all this time, she said:

"O-Okay, thank you!"

Indeed, this was unlike his usual behavior. As though trying to escape from the expression on her face, he turned his head away. Just as he was about to resume walking—Suddenly, he felt a weight on his shoulder.

"Oh~ How nice, someone's treating. Could you treat me to a drink as well?"

"...Lab Chief."

"Onii-chan!"

When did the Lab Chief appear? The Lab Chief was leaning an elbow against his shoulder, face supported on one hand, smiling as he spoke.

"...If you don't mind drinking canned coffee, I can treat you as many times as you want."

"Hahaha, I'm just kidding. Sorry for troubling you. Thanks for taking care of my little sister."

"No, I didn't do anything."

"Onii-chan, I got lost after you disappeared... He was just about to take me to your office, Onii-chan."

"Oh my, sorry sorry. I lost track of you for a moment."

The Lab Chief reached out and stroked her head. Although she was pouting slightly, her body seemed to be giving off an aura of relief. Apparently, things were fine now.

"...So, I'll be off."

"Oh right, Himura. Hold on."

He was quite astounded that the Lab Chief actually remembered his name. Looking back, he saw the Lab Chief still smiling.

"I have a task for you. I was just thinking who to entrust the task. Looks like this is a kind of fate. I'm sorry but could you serve as this child's instructor for now?"

"Me...?"

"Indeed. I've read through your personal details and I remember you have credits in teacher training courses, right? You also look like you're quite good at teaching others... Besides, you've already met this child already. I don't think you mind, right?"

"Ah... No, of course... There's no problem at all."

"Then it's decided. So, what do you say?"

The Lab Chief was the organization's leader. He was just a mere researcher. This was reason enough.

Apart from that—Definitely, there were no other reasons.

"...So long as you believe that I am up to the task."

"Very well, I'm relying on you. At any rate, today's task is simply getting her to my office and that's a wrap for today... Let's go, don't get lost this time."

"It's you who disappeared, Onii-chan—Uh, nice meeting you, please take care of me from now on, Himura-senpai!"

The girl bowed her head politely then followed after her brother. Just as Himura sighed and was about to turn around, he suddenly realized he had not asked for her name.

Watching the backs of the siblings receding in the distance, he heard the following conversation faintly.

"By the way, why did you pick a name like 'Yamimagari Pakuaki,' Onii-chan?"

"Hohoho, this sounds way cooler. As the leader of an organization researching the unknown, my name should be full of mystery as well... Why don't you change your name to Yamimagari Kirika as well?"

"N-No way, that's way too lame."

"To be honest, coming from you, that kind of hurts."

The two's figure disappeared as they turned a corner and their voices could no longer be heard.

(Kirika... huh? I wonder what's her family name...? Looks like it's not Yamimagari at least.)

Thinking over these things, he turned and left.

Her face and her voice, for some reason—kept occupying his mind endlessly.

The next day, he found out her full name—Ueno Kirika.

Part 2

Unmistakable.

Mummy Maker. Soon after Fear arrived at the Yachi home, the organization of the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion had sent a team to destroy Fear. Possessing the cursed «Chupacabra Bandage», Mummy Maker was the auxiliary assigned to support the mad destroyer, Peavey Barowoi. She had offered Haruaki's group a deal in hopes of protecting Peavey's life, but this backfired and was seen as betrayal by Peavey herself. Then—

"W-Why!? Why is this girl here!?"

Fear pulled out her Rubik's cube from her uniform pocket. Konoha tossed her schoolbag to the floor and readied a knifehand strike. However...

"..."

Mummy Maker was completely unresponsive, simply sitting in her wheelchair, staring off into space in a daze—truly in nothing but a daze. Rather than ignoring them, it really seemed as though she did not see Haruaki's group at all... No, it was like she was totally unaware of the outside world—

The light in the room was switched on. Haruaki looked back in surprise. Having pressed the wall switch, Kirika exhaled with a suffering expression.

"There's no need to be so wary. She... won't do anything at all. Rather, she can't do anything at all."

"What... happened?"

Haruaki asked. Kirika walked slowly over. Picking up the blanket that had fallen in front of the wheelchair, she used it to cover Mummy Maker's thighs. Even so, Mummy Maker remained motionless.

"How should I explain this...? I'm not sure if this is the correct way to put it, but in consideration of simplicity... That's right..."

Then Kirika took a deep breath and said:

"Her mind is broken."

"I don't... get it. What is going on? What on earth happened?"

"No idea. Although I've no idea... More importantly, I remember hearing the knight called Peavey mention that this child was already dead. In other words, she lied...?"

"But she didn't look like she was lying. Besides, judging from the way she said that she absolutely won't forgive Mummy Maker, what would be the point of lying..."

"Let me explain. It's just that I'm not sure where to start..."

At this moment, the doorbell echoed inside the apartment. Haruaki saw Kirika frowning while walking to the entrance. Then warily, she opened the door and the one who appeared was—

"Himura..."

"I'm now able to report a bit about the situation and check how things are where I'm here... Looks like you have guests. Hmm, what perfect timing by coincidence. I'd give a hundred marks for that."

As though saying "May I come in?", Himura shrugged, behaving differently from the way he acted in school. Kirika glared viciously at him for a moment before finally agreeing to his request.

"I don't trust you. However, it'll be faster for you to explain. Hurry up and be done with it."

"The price of admission, is it? I understand. Then I shall explain."
"

Hence, Kirika returned to the living room with Himura. Not only Kirika but also Fear and Konoha gazed at Himura warily. Casually sitting down on the sofa, he swept his gaze over everyone present.

"Hmm... It feels quite strange to see you all outside of school. Anyway, let me make myself clear first. You may have heard already, but I am a member of the Lab Chief's Nation."

"We heard already. Hmph, you're giving off a totally different impression compared to during the school day."

"Even if you've told us your real identity, don't think that we'll lower our guard. By the way... You just mentioned about checking how things are, right? Are you responsible for this child's presence here?"

"Himura-sensei, please tell us. What happened exactly?"

"Konoha-kun is already used to using honorific speech, I suppose... But Yachi, you don't need to address this man with respect. Just talk to him as you would an enemy."

Kirika was speaking with her arms crossed, leaning with her back against the wall. Haruaki understood that she distrusted Himura, but since this person had always been no more than a teacher to him, it felt difficult to suddenly drop the honorifics.

"How harsh... Yes, but it's fine no matter what manner of speech you use. As a matter of position, I just hope you'll use honorifics"

with me in school. In any case, let me pay the admission price. In other words, about Mummy Maker over there—Amanda Carlot."

Mummy Maker's original name was apparently Amanda. Despite having her name mentioned, the person in question simply continued to space out with unfocused eyes.

"The one who was supposedly killed by Peavey Barowoi, why is she still alive? —Simply stated, very simply, I saved her."

"You saved her?"

Fear asked and Himura nodded.

"Yes. At the time, I was wearing the Wathe, «Il est dans Bastille» , which can erase the wearer's sense of presence completely, to monitor those two's movements. When Peavey Barowoi used « Dance Time» to absorb this girl's blood, I was also nearby."

"Although I don't know what the situation was like at the time... You simply observed quietly without any attempt to stop it, right?"

"...That is my job."

Hearing Konoha's accusatory question, Himura muttered in reply. Somehow, it felt as though he was trying to convince himself.

"Then Peavey went berserk and left the scene to seek revenge on you. After she went away, I approached to confirm Amanda

Carlot's condition. It was utterly tragic. Her abdomen was sliced open with ruptured organs splattered out, it was a total blood bath. Naturally, her breathing and heart beat had already stopped."

"So she was actually dead at the time? Then how did she revive?"

"Let me give an example. Suppose someone was drowning in the sea and both their breathing and heart beat stopped. Provided that appropriate treatment is applied immediately, they can sometimes regain consciousness. In other words, so long as it's before the brain is completely deprived of oxygen, humans can be revived."

"Drowning in the sea is completely different from having the abdomen chopped into halves."

"You deserve a hundred marks. Of course that's true. However—Luckily at the time, there still existed a method to make someone 'whose abdomen was chopped into halves' turn back to the level of 'drowning in the sea.' «Chupacabra Bandage»... Amanda's Wathe that provided healing in exchange for blood and pain as the price... The fact that Peavey neither took it away nor destroyed it could be considered a massive stroke of luck."

"That moving bandage huh..."

"I wasn't sure if its taboo ability would activate towards someone on the verge of death whose heart and breathing had

stopped. However, nothing would happen if I didn't try so I just went ahead and tested it, using «Chupacabra Bandage» to wrap up Amanda's body, then—"

"She was... revived once more...?"

Haruaki whispered and looked towards the girl sitting in the wheelchair. Including Himura, everyone's gazes were directed towards the girl who had died and come back to life.

"A few minutes later—No, had I been a couple dozen seconds late, perhaps she truly would have died. But «Chupacabra Bandage» activated its taboo ability, just as usual, accompanied by pain that could make the target go mad. I took her to a medical facility affiliated with the Lab Chief's Nation. Soon after, this girl woke up. However, perhaps the curse's impact was too much and broke her mind. She was already like this when she woke up."

Not speaking.

Unable to move her body as well.

Turned into a creature that simply stared off into space.

"I... see..."

Haruaki sighed in depression. But he immediately thought of an important question that had not been raised, then looked up.

"Umm... Chances... of recovery...?"

Himura took a long breath and slowly began to speak:

"—Not entirely zero. Despite how she appears now, compared to when she first woke up, she has already recovered a lot. In her current condition, she will even react to external stimuli sometimes. Right now, she will chew on her own if food is placed in her mouth, but in the beginning, she needed nutrients to be delivered intravenously. Precisely because her recovery is going well, she is now discharged from the hospital—Kirika, have you fed her the medicine?"

"Not yet."

"Then please go ahead. There's probably not much left, right? I'll give you the refills."

Kirika snatched the sheet of tablets that Himura had taken out from his pocket and went to the kitchen. She returned with a cup of water. Saying "here, open your mouth" gently, Kirika placed a tablet by Amanda's lips which then opened slightly. Putting the tablet into Amanda's mouth, Kirika fed her water. Gulp, a slight swallowing motion could be seen in her throat.

Himura was right. Amanda was not completely unresponsive to the environment. She was neither a vegetable nor a doll. She was still alive—Unmistakably.

Hearing Himura mention that recovery was not entirely impossible and seeing Amanda responding as a human should, Haruaki was a little relieved. But only a little. Was her mind really going to recover back to normal? How long would it take?

"I basically understand why this child is still alive. Well then, here's the next question. Why is she here—in Ueno-san's apartment?"

"Of course, it's because I asked her to take care of Amanda. She can't keep living in the hospital but if she returns to the Knights Dominion, they'll most likely execute her for failing her mission. I could hardly steel my conscience to allow that... But on the other hand, this girl is not important enough to compel the Lab Chief's Nation as an organization to protect her. After all, the captured Peavey Barowoi is enough for interrogation purposes. The end result is that I had no choice but to take responsibility, having brought her to the hospital in the first place, to take care of her after discharge."

"Then why don't you take care of her? Why do you have to ask Kirika to help you?"

"I don't have pedophilia, so it would be somewhat problematic if I had to help her bathe. Once her mind recovers, it's very well possible she might bite her tongue to commit suicide out of shame and humiliation. Aside from that, I believe that it's better to have someone of the same gender helping her. Besides—"

Himura looked at Amanda again with a smile of self-deprecation on his face.

"The doctor said that it's better for her to get all kinds of external stimuli as this would help her psychotherapy. Rather than

have a cold and reticent man like me take care of her... Someone like Kirika here, who'll smile and talk to her, would have a more beneficial effect on Amanda."

Himura's self-deprecation did not seem to be an act. He really believed that Kirika taking care of Amanda would be more beneficial. In other words, he hoped for her recovery with great sincerity. That was what Haruaki concluded.

(It seems like Himura-sensei's image... compared to what Class Rep described, is more...)

Haruaki secretly glanced at Kirika. Why was Kirika so wary of Himura? She hated the Lab Chief's Nation as an organization, so as part of that—Maybe that was the reason, but Haruaki felt that there should be more to it.

At this point, Haruaki suddenly realized that he knew absolutely nothing about the relationship between these two. This was only natural. After all, it was only a few days ago when he learned of Himura's true identity. When did they first meet? And when did they start working together as partners? What did they do in the past—

"Of course, I don't intend to have Kirika take care of this girl indefinitely. The burden is too great. Although support cannot be obtained from the Lab Chief's Nation, I am currently looking for a trustworthy medical facility to conduct psychological rehabilitation. Once I find one, I'll transfer Amanda over to there."

"Until you find a medical facility huh... That said, are you really okay with this, Kirika? I can't believe you agreed to this request. Don't you hate this guy?"

"Yes, I hate him."

"Then why did you agree to his request? You called in sick to skip school today so as to take care of this girl, right? You're already making sacrifices in your own personal life."

"Yes, this man placed Amanda in my care the day before yesterday. Simply feeding her breakfast took me quite some effort yesterday. I also prepared all sorts of things she would need before I went to school, but it didn't work. As one might expect, even with lunch prepared, she was unable to eat on her own. The same goes for going to the bathroom... So I had no choice but to call in absent for today. I don't even know what I should do for tomorrow."

Haruaki recalled the scene yesterday, still vivid in his mind, and finally understood. Kirika had racked her brain, trying to figure out what to cook for Amanda, hence she made a breakfast menu that had no unity in theme at all. Then packing the extras as her lunch, she brought it to school... That was why yesterday's lunch duel had to be cancelled.

"Class Rep... Why do you need to go this far?"

"I've mentioned already, right? I am guilty of making Amanda like this. I'm the main reason why the situation became like this."

While looking at Amanda, Kirika tensed the arms she was crossing before her chest, as though embracing her own body tightly.

"Perhaps the situation was too chaotic at the time, which was why you didn't pursue the matter deeply. It's also possible that you noticed it but didn't speak out. In any case, I pretended that nothing had happened... All this time. Peavey murdered Amanda. As for why she murdered her, that's because Peavey thought Amanda was traitor. As for why Peavey came to such a conclusion —"

Kirika stared straight at Amanda, staring straight at that sense of guilt.

"Because I made her think that. It's Amanda's card that I stole from you, Yachi, and added information to it that would cause internal discord between them. Then I asked Himura to deliver the card to their hiding place. In other words, had I not done so back then, Amanda would not have been killed by Peavey. Although she's currently still alive, were it not for that, her mind should still be intact at least."

Haruaki recalled the situation back then, a long time ago. It was also the first incident that happened after Fear's arrival.

Peavey had attacked Fear but ended up getting an arm amputated by a berserk Fear. Mummy Maker could not bear to watch Peavey attempt to complete her mission even at the cost of her own life, hence she offered Haruaki's group a deal. After writing contact details on a card and handing it over to them,

Amanda promised to retreat to Peavey if they handed Fear over. Then somehow, the card went missing... Meanwhile, deciding that Mummy Maker's wish to save her was betrayal, Peavey eliminated her. Then Peavey headed over to attack the Yachi home. Just happening to visit, Kirika was caught up in the incident, but she—

"Well... Umm, you did it to help us, right? Also... How should I say this? After all, this girl was an enemy at the time."

Fear finished. Kirika nodded, then spoke in a tone of voice as though exasperated with herself:

"Yes. Perhaps the end result simply proves my naivety. It's just that I can't help but think: Although this girl is the enemy's companion, she's just an auxiliary who doesn't participate directly in battle. In actual fact, she didn't do anything to me—or Fear-kun and the others, probably. When someone like that suffers injuries that should have been fatal, as a result of my actions, can the whole matter really be dismissed by saying 'because she's an enemy'...? If it were acceptable to do whatever we want to anyone so long as they're in the enemy camp, then just for example, it'd be like saying that it's also okay to kill a cook who works in their stronghold's restaurant."

"Hmm... Indeed, that's... a bit hard to define..."

Konoha murmured with a troubled expression while Kirika sighed lightly.

"To be honest, I also hesitated in the beginning. But then I thought, at least I should meet her once in person before deciding

to accept or reject the request to take care of her. So I allowed her to make a visit to my home, but that's where I made a mistake. Ahhh, absolutely ridiculous. I know this isn't my style, but honestly... You see, she's currently not responding at all, right?"

"Yeah, nothing at all. She's like a doll."

Fear walked over to the wheelchair, where Amanda was staring off into space, proceeding to poke her cheeks and play with a few strands of her hair. Haruaki also reached out to wave his hand before Amanda's face to check her eyeball movements. But no matter what they did, Amanda remained unresponsive.

"Then try holding her hand."

Haruaki exchanged glances with Fear then held Amanda's hand lightly.

"Oh...?"

He could feel her holding his hand in return. Although she had no change in expression, this was definitely no illusion. Despite being very feeble in strength, she was definitely gripping his hand in return—like a child, lost in the dark, holding tightly to a mother's hand, as though seeking some sort of salvation.

"Should be some kind of reflex action... Apart from that, all she can do are movements like chewing her food, but for some reason, she will grip in return when you hold her hand. How should I say this...? As soon I learned of this fact, it bothered me a lot, making it impossible for me to ignore her and send her away..."

"Mmm... Hmm. Indeed, with that..."

Like Haruaki, Fear tried holding Amanda's hand and made a complicated expression, twisting her shoulder. Haruaki speculated that Fear had probably felt the same as him—an urge to protect.

Through this weak force, Amanda was relying on them, telling them of her presence. It felt as though her entire body would melt away and disappear into space as soon as they let go of her hand. The weak force exerted by this little hand seemed to be her only support that connected her to reality.

Presumably, the first time when Himura had brought Amanda to this place, Kirika had tried the same action and felt a rising urge to protect. Faced with Amanda whose mind had been destroyed as a result of her actions, Kirika must have pondered about what she was able to do.

"In any case, that's that... I made her like this. I am responsible for her. At least until this man finds a trustworthy medical facility, I don't mind taking care of her during this period—That's what's going on."

Haruaki gently released Amanda's hand and looked at everyone present.

Kirika seemed quite set on her decision and he could understand her reasons. However, this job seemed to be too much of a burden for a high school girl alone.

Then what should they do?

Dissuade Kirika? Stand aside and do nothing? Of course not. Seriously, that would be—absolutely ridiculous.

A conference requiring no words instantly concluded.

While continuing to hold Amanda's hand, Fear stared intently at the snow-white back of her hand and said:

"It's true that his girl is an enemy's companion. But after becoming like this, can she still be considered an enemy so matter-of-factly? That I can't be so sure. Anyway, putting that aside, Kirika, there's something you're mistaken about. You're not the only one who caused her to become like this. The one who attracted them here, chopped off Peavey's arm and filled Peavey with hatred, that person is also responsible. In other words, me."

"Hoo... Oh well, if we sit back and do nothing, I'm sure it'll eat away at our consciences. It can't be helped, I'll admit it as well. Had I been fast and merciless enough in driving those people away back then, then Ueno-san wouldn't have needed to come up with that plan and the current situation would be quite different. In other words, I am responsible for not being competent enough."

"I'm also responsible for failing to notice the card's theft."

"Wha..." As Kirika went speechless, Haruaki turned to her, smiled and spoke as the representative:

"Therefore, Class Rep, let us help too. It's very tough for you to do it alone."

"No, but..."

Kirika tried to object but could not speak up firmly. Haruaki simply used his eyes to question her: Class Rep, by this point, do you really think we'll back down so easily?

Finally, Kirika sighed and surrendered.

"...Sorry."

Fear finally let go of Amanda's hand and said:

"Kirika, you don't need to apologize. For now, let's forget that this girl used to be an enemy. I simply need to do something beneficial to others and it's a very tough job for you to take care of a patient on your own, Kirika, so I can't leave things alone and have no choice but to take care of this bandage girl who I seem to have seen somewhere before... Anyway, that's that. Everything is due to unavoidable circumstances. Unavoidable circumstances."

"If it were mental trauma, it's probably useless even if Kuroe-san transfers life force to her. But still, I'll discuss with Kuroe-san after we get home."

"Let me ask, just in case. Himura-sensei, it should be okay if we offer our help, right?"

"In fact, it'll be a great help. I'm sure more lively surroundings will be beneficial for her mind."

Himura agreed readily. He really acted differently compared to expected. Considering how Kirika had warned them repeatedly,

Haruaki's impression of Himura was someone much less reasonable.

Similarly, Konoha showed doubt in her eyes as though she had thought of something.

"Oh, by the way... There are two things I wish to ask you, Himura-sensei."

"What a great student for asking questions. Let me award you a hundred marks first."

"Even if you praise me, I won't be pleased. First point, I would like you to fill in why exactly did you ask Ueno-san to take care of this child? There should be others in your circle who are female and able to care for this child, right? Even though she only arrived here recently."

"Are you referring to researcher Un Izoey? I only greeted her for the first time yesterday, so unfamiliarity is one of the reasons. The Lab Chief's Nation has no need for the person named Amanda, so this counts as my personal problem. That's reason number two. Also, I've heard that she used to serve as the Lab Chief's bodyguard. Combat ability aside, in terms of common sense knowledge, I'm a bit worried about her ability to take care of a patient."

"Hmm... That last point is actually quite understandable. Every lunch break, that girl is always chomping on meat buns held in both hands. It really makes me wonder if she'll ever tire of them."

So a scene like that was taking place every day in the classroom next door? Haruaki could not help but imagine it... Most likely, the other students must be gazing at her with eyes like looking at a pet .

"Next question. When you arrived at this apartment, you mentioned how you're 'now able to report a bit about the situation. ' Then your purpose here is not just to visit this child."

"I am very curious about this too. Himura, what is the report you mentioned?"

"Having good memory and observation skills are truly an advantage. Well then... I have good news and bad news. Going with the usual procedure, one should start with the good news first, but regrettably, let's go with the bad first because it'll be easier for you all to understand. Then I'll be blunt—The Knights Dominion has started taking action."

As soon as he spoke, the atmosphere immediately became extremely tense. Fear frowned and said:

"They're trying to destroy me again...?"

"That should be part of the reason. But the matter does not end there. I'm not sure where they heard it from but they seem to know that Amanda is still alive. In other words..."

Himura pushed his long bangs and exhaled.

"They intend to execute Amanda who had failed her mission and was captured by the Lab Chief's Nation."

Haruaki's group was speechless. If Amanda were returned to the Knights Dominion, she would most likely be executed. That was why she was not returned. Then what if they came knocking at the door on their own?

"Rumors say that the knight sent is an ace with quite powerful abilities. Then let me get on to the good news. Although it's not certain, rumors say that this knight was assigned a certain Wathe on an experimental basis."

"I'm more concerned about the bad news... But I'll still continue listening. That's the term you use to call cursed tools, right? What kind of tool is it?"

"Now that's a coincidence that's almost like a miracle." Opening with this line, Himura continued:

"—According to rumors, *it is a Wathe for recovering mental health.*"

Haruaki's group was dumbfounded again. To them, this was perhaps good news indeed. Right now, here was a person whose mind was broken. If that tool could be used to heal her mind—

The next to speak was Kirika.

"Why would the Knights Dominion use something like that?"

"Since you lot have engaged Peavey Barowoi in battle, you should be able to understand. The Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion is an organization founded on fanatical hatred towards Wathes. Moving forward in the name of hatred, swinging the weapon called insanity, speaking words of grudging resentment. Essentially, the stronger a knight, the more they exhibit the Knights Dominion's style—In other words, the stronger a knight, the more insane. Furthermore, powerful knights heading off to harsh battlefields result in even deepened insanity. But no matter how strong, a pawn becomes useless once it is insane to the point of no longer being capable of executing plans normally. Hence, this experiment aims to maintain their sanity."

"This sounds like there's still many uncertainties..."

"That I concede. I will continue to gather more information."

"If that tool really has the ability that you claim, perhaps we could take it by force to use...? But if it means using a cursed tool, hmm..."

"Yes. Just like back in Christmas, it could very well be accompanied by an astounding curse."

Recalling the difficult battle that his and the superintendent's sides had faced against Kokoro Pentangeli's sword, Haruaki remarked quietly.

"Of course, I won't force any of you. Just decide once we capture the opponent. However, as one who researches Wathes, my advice

is that this option should not be ruled out from the start. Like «Chupacabra Bandage», Wathes can even save lives in different situations."

"Hmph... But I think homicide happens far more often than saving people. Whatever, we're still not sure about this tool so speculating isn't going to help. Once it appears before us for real, then we'll decide. Right now, the question we need to consider is the bad news about the enemy's impending attack."

"The attacking enemy must be defeated... Same as usual."

At this moment, Kirika clicked her tongue and glared at Himura viciously.

"So that's why you said that it's perfect timing for Yachi's group to be here, right? You are planning to use them as a combat force to protect Amanda, aren't you?"

"I had no intention of using them, but it's true that I predicted a fight as the final outcome. After all, I don't think the Knights Dominion will leave Fear-in-Cube alone, so they can't possibly remain uninvolved."

Without anyone noticing, Himura had already stood up from the sofa. Despite watching him all this time, Haruaki completely failed to notice his movements.

"Basically, let me state for the record. I cannot act in the name of the Lab Chief's Nation regarding this matter. I've already mentioned just now that the organization does not deem Amanda

Carlot important enough to require their protection. Even if I report directly to the Lab Chief, he'll simply say 'too dangerous, don't resist and hand her over.'"

"As if anyone would want to contact that guy. Absolutely ridiculous... From the way you sound, you're not doing this according to his orders?"

"I believe the Lab Chief has received news of this matter, but he hasn't issued any particular orders. So that means he doesn't care however I choose to proceed."

Haruaki suddenly found Himura walking towards the exit already. Due to his extreme lack of presence, all of his movements were very inconspicuous.

"I'm relying on you all to take care of Amanda. The Knights Dominion probably won't locate this place that quickly and attack. But definitely, they will appear eventually. Don't lower your guard. I will continue to gather information."

"Wait."

Kirika called out to him from behind. Himura stopped. As though hesitating, Kirika paused for a few seconds before using a voice that sounded like it was forced out:

"...When you entrusted Amanda to me, there were a few things I didn't ask you. Clearly without orders from the Lab Chief's Nation, why do you want to save her? Out of personal reasons? You—You aren't such a compassionate man, are you?"

"What a terrible comment, I'd say it's worth zero marks. Hmm, considering everything I've done to this date, that's hardly surprising."

"Answer me! I still can't believe in you!"

Himura's shoulder shook up and down slightly. His answer was very simple and brief.

At the same time, it was also baffling.

"Like you, for redemption."

"...!"

Kirika's eyes wavered and she could not speak anymore. Himura continued walking and opened the main door. But just as he was about to step out, he looked back and said:

"By the way, Fear Cubrick."

"W-What?"

"Nothing important. I've already graded today's test paper and you scored quite a high mark. Compared to the beginning, you're showing marked progress. Please continue to do your best like this."

"Huh...?"

On high alert all this time, Fear reacted with her jaw dropping in surprise upon hearing unexpected praise.

Seeing Fear's expression, Himura's lips curled slightly.

Indeed, like a very ordinary teacher, smiling from joy at a student's growth—

Then he walked out of Kirika's apartment.

Part 3

After a long discussion, considering that it would be more convenient to take care of Amanda as a group, as well as the possibility of enemy attacks, they decided to move her to the Yachi residence. Kirika also packed her things for staying over.

Having explained the story to Kuroe when she returned from the beauty parlor, they managed to feed dinner to Amanda with great difficulty. Then when the after-dinner snack time ended, several dozen minutes later...

Fear and Kuroe were in the changing area next to the bathroom.

"So... Although we've brought her here, now what?"

Looking at Amanda sitting on the wheelchair, Fear crossed her arms and tilted her head. Their next task was to help her take a bath, of course. Doing it alone seemed quite difficult, so Fear enlisted Kuroe's aid.

"Hmm~ Anyway, since it's a bath, let's take off our clothes as well. Cast off!"

"I don't really get what you're yelling at the end there, but I agree."

Fear and Kuroe swiftly stripped down. After all, they were all girls and she was very familiar with Kuroe, so there was nothing to be embarrassed about. Once naked—

"So of course, we need to help her undress as well. Kuroe, help her sit up a bit."

"Watch me~"

Since Amanda's attire consisted of a simple one-piece dress, it was quite easy to take off. While Kuroe lifted Amanda's bottom, Fear pulled Amanda's dress up all at once to remove her clothing. This revealed her white underwear of a plain design (no bra) and the bandages wrapped around her body. Naturally, no one takes baths with bandages, right? Fear untied the bandages one by one. Unlike their initial encounter, these bandages wrapped around Amanda's body were only ordinary bandages. According to Himura, that «Chupacabra Bandage» was apparently behind held by the Lab Chief's Nation.

"Is this... okay...?"

"Oh my. This... She's clearly a girl, but what a poor dear..."

Seeing what lay beneath the bandages, Fear gasped. Skin, as white as silk, contrasted sharply with skin of the opposite. These seemed to be old scars and probably not painful, but conversely, the sight was heartbreaking for viewers.

Fear narrowed her eyes while pulling Amanda's underwear off from her waist. Then holding the equally nude Amanda in her arms, Fear pushed the glass door open with her foot and entered the bathroom.

"...Let's wash her first. Have her sit here... Uwah."

"Since there's nothing to lean on, I'll use my hair to support her."

Hence, Kuroe's hair gently wrapped itself around Amanda's arms and torso. With this, they were finally able to seat her on the bathroom stool.

Dividing the labor, Fear washed the front while Kuroe was responsible for Amanda's back. Despite her slender body being covered by layers of soap suds, Amanda remained expressionless and unresponsive.

"...Something must have happened to her in the past."

"Drawing on my experience, I can tell... As much as I hate the fact that I can tell, these are scars from burns."

"Was she caught up in a fire once?"

"Probably."

Perhaps it was an allusion, but somehow, Fear kept getting the feeling that the burn scars on Amanda's body were identical to the ones Fear had created in the past as a tool of torture and execution, such as the «Voices of the Brazen Bull». The scars exuded a sense

of someone's malice and intent to harm. Even if these scars were caused by a fire, it was most likely no accident—Deliberate arson committed due to some sort of horrifying reason.

Perhaps these scars had changed Amanda's life. Maybe it served as some sort of opportunity leading to Amanda joining the organization of the Knights Dominion. However, one could not sense from her any desire for vengeance against cursed tools. Then the fire itself was probably not a direct reason.

One could imagine all sorts of possibilities. For example, after Amanda was sent to the hospital and deemed a lost cause, she could have been sold to an unlicensed doctor for human experiments, then after she was wrapped up in cursed bandages, the Knights happened to show up by chance to kill that unlicensed doctor and ended up taking her away while they were at it—Something like that. Fear did not know any details. Only by asking Amanda herself could anyone hope to figure out her past.

Only now did Fear realize that she knew virtually nothing about this girl named Amanda Carlot.

"Although I treat every enemy with hostility... Perhaps this girl does have quite a complicated past."

"Yeah. If only we could converse with her. Hmm—the back is basically done. Okay, then it's about time for me to use my professional hair washing skills."

Leaving the hair washing to Kuroe, Fear washed the body of the girl who used to be an enemy, washing the body of the girl whose

reasons for becoming an enemy were unknown, washing the body of the girl who could not answer this question. When the lathered sponge touched a sensitive spot, although it was very faint, Fear did feel Amanda's body tremble as though ticklish. Even simply just a physiological reaction—Indeed, she was not dead, she was still alive.

Fear washed Amanda's arm and took this opportunity to hold her hand lightly as they had done at Kirika's home.

Indeed, she held Fear's hand in return.

This feeling was like being bitten lightly by a small animal. Was she trying to convey some kind of message? Was she seeking something desperately? That faint force was accompanied by an unbelievable sense of self-awareness, causing Fear to grin.

(Yes. Being able to talk to this girl one more time at least... That would be nice too.)

After Amanda's mind recovered, who knew what the situation might be like? Still the companion of enemies? Or some role apart from enemies? But at least, Fear was certain, this could not be confirmed unless her mind recovered. They must first deal with the knight who wants to execute her in order to get an answer.

To be honest, Fear got into taking care of Amanda simply as part of going with the flow. Things started with Kirika taking on the responsibility to care for her and Fear was simply helping Kirika. However, Fear now felt she had found a reason for slightly wanting to do so.

While feeling the force transmitted to her hand, Fear looked into Amanda's unfocused eyes and whispered:

"I don't know what you're trying to say... But anyway, you don't need to worry, Amanda. Since we promised, we will take good care of you. Not only will we prevent the Knights Dominion from harming you, but we'll also help your mind recover. Leave it to us."

Of course, Amanda did not reply. Washing her hair behind her, Kuroe smiled and said:

"Since Ficchi has decided this already, I will do my best to help~ Although the situation might be very complex, simply in terms of feelings, I have discovered a source of favorability points that compels me to stand on this child's side."

"I agree." Fear nodded with eyes full of tender affection while looking at that source of favorability on Amanda's body.

As the leader of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance, she definitely had no choice but to recognize this flat chest as thoroughly flat.

Part 4

The day after they learned of Amanda's situation at Kirika's home, it was after school Haruaki's group was walking in the corridors.

There were still many students hanging around in the corridors, chatting excitedly with high-pitched voices. "Hey hey, what about

you? Have you decided who you'll give it to?" "Eh~? N-N-No, what about you~?" "Speaking of which, that guy in Class 4 thinks you're..." What were these girls talking about? Come to think of it, lately the entire student body seemed to be in an excitable state... Hmm?

Haruaki's thoughts were interrupted by Fear when they reached their destination.

"Please~ Lead the way~!"

"I've been intrigued for a while already, why do you yell that every time you arrive here? Why do you make it sound like you're crashing a party?"

"Nothing much, I just get a feeling that this door must be opened with great vigor, whether because there are tasty snacks and tea waiting for me or because it greatly resembles a corrupt bureaucrat's base of operations."

"Hahaha! I have never received any golden confectionery from Echigoya, you know?"[\[1\]](#)

As soon as they walked into the superintendent's office, the gas masked man, making one of his seldom appearances at school, spoke with his shoulders shaking from laughter. "Hello." Konoha and Kirika bowed their heads to greet, eliciting a wave of his hand in response. Naturally, he was not the only one present—

"Welcome, everyone. Please allow me to prepare some tea."

"Everybody, welcome to you all~! Oh, Zenon-san, of course, I'll help out too~!"

"I'm counting on you two for my share too~ But, oh~ Having to blow on my tea to cool it is so tiring... Dear sister, or little maid, could you please help blow on mine for me~"

"Then I shall bring out tap water for you, Onee-sama, for which no cooling is required. Sovereignty, please turn on the tap with full sincerity... Of course, I am saying all this out of my kind consideration in hopes of saving you effort, Onee-sama."

"Bubu~ Ah, does this count as a blowing gag? But even explaining it is too tiring~"

Hence, Zenon and Sovereignty got up and headed to the room next door to brew tea. Wearing a white coat, Ganon simply sat on the sofa, completely relaxed.

There was nothing surprising about these three's presence in the superintendent's office, except for—

"..."

"Yes~ The string need to be pulled up here and here—It's here~! Secret technique 'Amida Buddha Statue' complete! Ohoh, it's been a long time since I've last seen this move, even for me... How gratifying~"

Sitting in a wheelchair was a white-haired girl with a hollow gaze, as well as—

Using the girl's fingers to play cat's cradle and make complicate patterns—Kuroe, dressed in school uniform. Seeing her mutter Buddhist chants while bowing at the figure formed by the cat's cradle for some reason, Haruaki sighed.

"Hmm... No matter how many times I see this, it feels so out of place..."

"Muu, that's so rude! Hmm, but honestly, I never expected to have another chance to wear this uniform again~ I knew it, the gods must be asking me to enjoy school life thoroughly!"

"No such thing. Anyway, please don't cause another commotion like last time..."

Kuroe had sneaked into school before, dressed in a uniform. Of course, that was definitely not for the sake of a prank but for her own reasons—But it was definitely true that she had caused a commotion.

Once they decided to take care of Amanda, the first issue was what to do with her during the daytime. After much pondering, the group decided to take her to school directly. After all, even if the enemy attacked, it probably would not happen openly in a crowded place like a school. But of course, they could not leave Amanda in a classroom, hence they phoned the superintendent to explain the situation. "After all, I caused a lot of trouble for you during Christmas and owe you all a favor." Saying that, he agreed readily and allowed Amanda to stay in the superintendent's office.

Even so, it did not feel right to shove the responsibility of taking care of Amanda all on Zenon in the superintendent's office, so in the end, they decided to take turns skipping class to visit her... Back when Haruaki's group was discussing this matter, Kuroe raised her hand and said: "Then let me help as well." Although it was a shame that she had to skip work, but indeed, with Kuroe present, even if the enemy attacked, she was at least able to run away while taking Amanda with her. Hence, they finally accepted Kuroe's suggestion. Like last time, she obtained a uniform from who knows where—probably partially to be less inconspicuous in school, partially out of personal desire, finding it more fun this way.

"So Kuroe-san, how is the situation?"

"The same as usual. I haven't sensed any presence of the rumored pursuer. For now, I tried out therapeutic cat's cradle, but she's not reacting at all~"



"This is only my opinion as a school physician, so take it with a grain of salt, but here's a few words from me... Just wait patiently for now. As much as I hate saying this, this isn't the kind of thing that will show dramatic improvement in one or two days' time."

"That's... true."

Kirika nodded in response to Ganon. Indeed, impatience would not help at all. Haruaki murmured in his thoughts to persuade himself. Even once her mind recovered, they did not know what to say to a former enemy like her—However, surely it would still be a better situation than now.

Next, Haruaki suddenly recalled that he needed to thank them.

"Ganon-san, thank you... The same for you too, Zenon-san. We originally didn't want to trouble you two, but it feels like we ended up troubling you after all."

"Don't worry, don't worry, because we caused trouble for you too. I won't complain about being tired at a time like this... Besides, I'm also tired of sitting in the infirmary with nothing to do~ It's nice to be working as a school physician on call sometimes."

"Yes, Yachi-sama, please do not mind."

At this moment, Zenon returned with a tray with cups, still expressionless as usual, but her voice sounded quite gentle. With experienced movements, she handed the steaming tea over to each member of Haruaki's group in turn—Meanwhile, Sovereignty

exited the room next door slightly later, carrying a glass with two hands as one would carry a trophy while swaying unsteadily in a panic.

"W-Wawa... Phew! I managed to make it! Here you go, Genon-san, I have prepared this for you with full sincerity!"

"I can't believe you actually made her bring water over! You're really bullying your elder sister~"

"I don't recall you saying you wanted tea specifically? This only happened because you keep slacking off and crying tired. Please pull yourself together, Onee-sama."

While Zenon spoke calmly and Sovereignty stared with her head tilted, Ganon sipped her tap water forlornly. This pair of sisters really got along together well. At least, Haruaki decided to treat that as the conclusion.

"Here's the girl's portion too."

"Oh, then let me cool it for her by blowing. After all, I'm the one responsible for taking care of Amanda in school... I guess feeding her with a spoon would be best."

Kuroe took a spoonful of tea and brought it next to Amanda's mouth. Gulp, her throat swallowed but her expression remained unchanged. Haruaki's group began to chat casually while drinking tea. After all, they only turned up to pick up Kuroe and Amanda without anything important to do at the superintendent's office. Once they finished their tea, the group took their leave.

Leaving the superintendent's office, they headed to the shoe lockers. The entire school building seemed rather quiet. Students in clubs were currently focused on club activities, hence, apart from them, those belonging to the "go-home" club had almost all departed, but not completely. When the occasion student passed by in the corridors, they would stare suspiciously at the bandaged girl in the wheelchair, but there was no issue as long as Haruaki's group acted confidently as though everything was legitimate. Thus, they walked through the hallways in a line.

"Hmm~ I knew it, this does cause trouble for the superintendent's side..."

"It can't be helped. Without their assistance, there's no way to bring this girl to school at all."

Fear pushed Amanda's wheelchair while reacting to Haruaki's whispers.

"But I'd feel so guilty if we keep troubling them. If only this girl will recover soon... But so-called mental trauma is very tricky. We don't really know how to cure it either."

"Yeah, although Himura-sensei mentioned that exposing her to more external stimuli would help, it feels quite ambiguous and nonspecific."

"External stimuli huh? Hmm..."

Fear tilted her head and pondered deeply for a while, then finally stopped walking.

"I've got an idea—We've got nothing left to do except going home, right? Then let's take this opportunity to show her around school. What do you all think?"

"I don't mind."

Kirika glanced at Haruaki. Haruaki did not have any objections, neither did Konoha nor Kuroe.

"After all, we're not in a hurry to get back and there aren't too many students remaining in school right now. As long as we don't do anything too conspicuous, it should be fine."

"I'm totally okay with it~ After all, I belong to the faction who wants to be shown around the school!"

"Then let's try it out.. But why?"

Haruaki's simple question caused Fear to scratch her face and turn her gaze away.

"Mmm... Hmm... Umm, I simply recalled my first time here. The building seemed so big, there were so many people, everyone was wearing the same kind of clothes, it was so lively everywhere, it was very refreshing, I guess—It was very stimulating for me. So, even though there's very few people now, I think it should still be able to stimulate this girl a bit..."

"Fear..."

"W-What's with your shameless look? I'll curse you! I-I simply think that if this girl could be cured as quickly as possible, it'll save us a lot of trouble! Although she's human, surely she's never gone to school normally before—In this regard, she should be the same as me!"

Fear desperately tried to find excuses. How amusing. Not only Haruaki but also Konoha, Kirika and Kuroe smiled slightly.

Hence, Haruaki and friends took Fear's suggestion and took Amanda on a walking tour around the school, meanwhile talking to Amanda. Although she made no reaction, surely this did not mean it was pointless—Probably.

"This is our classroom. This is my seat. That's Haruaki's seat and that's Kirika's."

"Uheehhehee, so this is Haru's spot huh... Great, I'll be starting the secret operation of replacing the recorder mouthpiece, please don't mind me."

"I mind very much! Say, stop searching the desk in front of the owner! Also, I chose art instead of music! There's no recorder here in the first place!"

Next was Konoha's homeroom. Then taking advantage of after school, they visited club activities without disturbing others. Fear picked up Amanda together with the wheelchair and went up and down the stairs. Standing outside the music classroom, they listened to the woodwind club's performance for quite a while.

Then through the door's gap, they secretly peeked into the calligraphy classroom. Then they visited the snack shop and the cafeteria.

"Oh~ There's quite a lot of menu choices... Since you guys usually bring packed lunches, you don't have much chance to come here, right? Is there anything good to eat?"

Arms crossed with insufferable arrogance, Fear declared with exceptional conceit:

"They don't have rice crackers here. Simply by this fact I deem this cafeteria third-rate."

"Using your logic, the world doesn't have any cafeterias second-rate or beyond... Hmm, of the things I've tried before, the mapo doufu is quite good."[\[2\]](#)

"Also, although it's not very conspicuous, the salads are quite fulfilling too. The vegetables are always very fresh."

"There's also the udon noodles with meat or the porkchop cutlet rice. If I really had to criticize, sometimes the udon uses brown seaweed to obfuscate the amount of meat or the porkchops are too thin. As a result, although the taste is impeccable, the quality is too inconsistent. If anything, I should condemn this attitude of treating meat as anything less than the main feature. Completely unacceptable. For a meat dish whose name is crowned with the word 'meat' or 'porkchop', it is utter blasphemy—"

"Uh... Kono-san, Kono-san, there's no need to push your viewpoint so seriously. I was only just making conversation..."

Next, they passed through the corridor connecting two school buildings to reach the clubs block and peek at the activities of the cultural clubs.

Fear picked up Amanda, holding her up by her underarms, allowing her to peer into the manga club's activities from the small window above the door. However, Fear suddenly pouted with displeasure and said:

"How boring."

"I don't think there are many cultural clubs that hold activities with great fanfare."

"That's so naive! For example, a manga research club should at least be drawing battle manga while maintaining the mindset of actual combat!"

Fear sat Amanda down on the wheelchair again and said:

"But... Even if I complained here, the cultural clubs aren't going to get lively and spectacular suddenly. Speaking of lively, I guess it has to be the sports clubs after all. The first I was here, although I didn't know the rules, I had so much fun just watching. Then let's finish up by observing the sports ground from the roof."

The timing was just right. "Let's do it." Reaching consensus, the group moved again, back to the main school building. Just as they were heading up the stairs to the roof—

"...My statement: a greeting expressing what a coincidence."

Arriving head on was Un Izoey. Gray hair as usual, dressed in her uniform with her navel exposed, barefoot in definitely contravention of school rules. Although it was perfectly natural, she was probably not involved in any club activities. Why was she still staying in school at this time?

"What are you doing here?"

"My answer: in order to get used to this environment, undertaking research to master geographic locations, to make sure where is what. In other words, a strolling kind of stroll."

Un Izoey answered while her emotionless eyes captured Kuroe in school uniform. As though saying "Is this person a student...?", she tilted her head. Next, her eyes also caught sight of the girl in the wheelchair, causing her head to tilt in the other direction.

"...You don't recognize this girl?"

"My answer: unknown. A person related to me?"

Haruaki's question brought a firm answer from Un Izoey. After all, Himura had said that "the Lab Chief's Nation did not deem Amanda important" and she had been hospitalized until recently, it was not surprising that Un Izoey had never seen her before.

Ultimately, since Himura was protecting Amanda in a personal capacity, Haruaki's group had already decided.

Since an enemy was going to attack, the more people they had on their side the better. Moreover, Un Izoey was very strong. However, even if they could recruit her to their cause, they decided against it.

So long as the Lab Chief's Nation had not issued orders to protect Amanda, borrowing Un Izoey's strength for convenience would mean owing the Lab Chief's Nation a favor. Even if Un Izoey did not see it that way, Yamimagari Pakuaki could still argue this point. Right now, it was necessary to avoid as much as possible giving him a pretext to take Kirika away or demand researching Fear—That was what Haruaki's group had decided.

"This is none of your business, so don't interfere. Okay, we won't disrupt your stroll. Hurry along now!"

"That I will do, but..."

Un Izoey walked barefoot, giving off faint footsteps (but had she the intention, surely she could have walked silently), approaching Haruaki's group. Then just as she was passing by them, she suddenly halted. With completely emotionless eyes, she gazed down at Amanda's hollow expression—

Then reaching out, she gently caressed Amanda's white hair.

Stroking Amanda's head, Un Izoey acted like lovingly petting a small animal. Amanda made no response but Un Izoey narrowed her eyes.

"Diagnosis: the flow of her *raama* is very strange. Does not seem injured or ill."

"You don't need to worry about this. Absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika scowled and retorted. Shortly after, Un Izoey took her hand away.

"In these cases, our tribe will start by checking food."

"You mean she'll get better just by getting fed with tree sap or livers? Now that would be absolutely ridiculous. Don't make irresponsible statements so casually."

"This is simply the way of our tribe... Then I leave by taking my leave."

Nodding lightly to say goodbye, Un Izoey walked away. She was probably resuming her exploration of the school building.

Once confirmed that she had disappeared into the other end of the corridor, Fear murmured coldly:

"Should I call her hard at work...? Hmm, she must be very free too."

Then she started pushing the wheelchair again.

Part 5

Through the roof fencing, Kirika stared out at the sports ground, lost in her thoughts. The students of the sports clubs were busy running around. The sounds of vigorous but hoarse yells and balls bouncing could be heard. Haruaki, Fear, Konoha and Kuroe—as well as Amanda sitting motionless on her wheelchair—watched this scene silently. What was Amanda thinking—or rather... What could she think?

At this moment, the roof's metal gate opened with a grate. Kirika looked back to see no one—but just as she concluded that—

"So you're all here?"

"Hmm, you're Himura? How did you know we're here?"

"Because I happened to overhear students talking about someone in a wheelchair. Nothing much, I just wanted to have a look, thinking that since you're still in school after all."

"Unfortunately, there's no change in this girl so far."

"Really?" Himura muttered with deep condolence. His footsteps sounded extremely weak in presence as he walked over to Kirika's side and looked out at the sports ground through the fencing. To be honest, Kirika did not wish to converse with him at all, but there was no choice given the circumstances. She threw a sideways glance at Himura.

"...Any progress?"

"Sorry, there hasn't been any significant progress. I am still searching for a hospital willing to take in this child. There are not many places capable of admitting patients with special circumstances and able to treat mental trauma at the same time. Although it's not impossible, the search will take more time."

"What about the Knights Dominion?"

"No detailed reports on that side either. However, it is certain that the enemy is approaching us. Be careful."

I don't need you to tell me that—Kirika retorted in her thoughts. Before her eyes was a girl who had nearly died because of her, a girl who had suffered a critical wound equivalent to death. Absolutely, Kirika would not let anyone kill her again.

Just as she spent a few seconds to confirm her determination, Himura's presence vanished from beside her. Did he go over to Fear and the others to flap his gums? She looked next to her but her guess was wrong. Himura was still next to her. Unlike normally, his eyes looked like he was being considerate of their feelings. Apparently, she had simply stopped sensing his presence just now simply because Himura's sense of presence was too weak.

Simply? Absolutely ridiculous.

This was a curse. The one carried by «Il est dans Bastille», the cursed mask in Himura's possession.

Kirika was definitely not worrying about him, but to think she had forgotten this important element of the curse, how absolutely ridiculous. Even if he was being devoured by the curse, she did not care at all. She did not care. She did not care.

However, why did her lips move on their own?

"...You're still using «Il est dans Bastille», right?"

"Yes. I can't collect information without using it. Could it be... You're worrying about me?"

"Like hell anyone would worry about you. Absolutely ridiculous."

How unlike myself—Kirika thought. Yes, this was totally unlike herself. Her pace was messed up, messed up by something. What was it?

Naturally, it was because Himura was currently acting too unlike himself.

What was different about Himura after his return? Impression, temperament, attitude. He no longer forced his way to approach her. Over the phone, he had said: I have decided to change. Then he was taking action to protect Amanda unrelated to the Lab Chief's Nation, and the reason was—

Redemption.

This was the word he had said before leaving yesterday. She did not understand his true meaning behind that word.

Asking him directly would be faster. However—

"..."

She could not bring herself to ask. Completely opposite to just now, her lips would not move.

Kirika turned her gaze lightly back towards the sports ground below.

Suddenly surfacing in her mind was a past memory she had no wish of recalling again.

Guilt. Himura's guilt. What would it be? No idea. How could she possibly know—

—The number of clues was truly too abundant.

Part 6

As the days passed, she was gradually getting used to research. Although she did not feel like she was helping, at least she was not creating work for others, probably... But perhaps, this might be merely her own wishful thinking.

Every day after leaving from middle school, she headed off to that place. Inside the changing room, putting on the lab coat that did not fit her, she then proceeded to her assigned laboratory.

"Good morning, Himura-senpai."

Although it was evening, the greetings were always "good morning." Researchers had no concept of night or day. Since it was commonly morning when one woke up, in other words, the first greeting upon meeting someone the first time for that day would be good morning. "This is just a habit without particular significance." Her senior had whispered this while explaining to her.

"You're here. I am currently about to measure the mass of this piece of cloth. Kirika, come over to help."

"Yes."

A day like every other. Although she had gotten to know quite a few people, there was essentially only one person she would see every day and greet. Naturally, her brother was also present at the facility, but his hectic schedule prevented her from seeing him often.

After starting her life here and taking part in the research, things changed when roughly a year went by.

A stray dog had gotten lost within the research facility's compound. Without thinking, she had fed the dog. This was its misfortune. Although she wanted to go home, the dog kept following her.

"Uh... Sorry. I... don't have anymore food to give you..."

Of course, the dog did not understand human speech. It simply panted leisurely with its tongue stuck out, wagging its tail. Kirika steeled her heart, stood up and left but could hear the sound of claws striking the ground as the dog walked. Sighing, she turned around and frowned while petting the dog's head.

"What should I do? Even if you follow me home... I can't keep you..."

Several researchers passed by her on their way home. Some of them ignored the sight while others smiled at her before continuing on their way. Still others struck conversation with her. "Logically speaking, a stray dog has no owner. A dog without an owner will not have received vaccination as required by Japanese laws. An unvaccinated dog may be infected with rabies and other diseases, so getting infected is quite likely a risk. In other words, reaching the logical conclusion according to logical thought, the logical advice I offer to you is—Call the Ministry of Health." Naturally, she refused.

What should I do? What should I do? She continued to stroke the puppy's head. During this time, small raindrops began to fall. Back luck always arrived in pairs or more. All covered in dirt, the puppy still did not move, panting while staring at her as though waiting for its master's orders. Perhaps the rain could clean its fur, but Kirika could not leave it behind for that reason. Even a puppy would catch a cold if not dried, probably.

Just at this moment—

"...What are you doing?"

"Himura-senpai! Umm... This puppy, it..."

He looked like he was about to go home. Not wearing a lab coat, holding one of those plastic umbrellas supplied at the lab, he was looking at the collar-less puppy.

"...I think I understand the basic situation. However, all I can say is that this dog cannot be allowed into the facility. The laboratory's precise equipment cannot allow a single speck of dust. If this dog's shed fur were to cause machinery to malfunction, compensation is beyond your ability."

"Ah—"

These were cold words. Although he had always been gruff and impolite, Kirika never found him cold before. Whether teaching her or instructing her to carry out difficult research (although due to being too gruff, sometimes his words failed to convey his meaning), he always explained seriously to her in detail. Even towards someone like her, what would be a child in his eyes. Hence, she never considered him to be cruel and merciless. Despite being difficult to comprehend at a glance, he was actually a kind person—Never did she think...

Silently, he began to continue forward. When he passed by her, the raindrops disappeared over her head for an instant.

"...?"

Then the raindrops stopped falling.

Only then did she realize that the plastic umbrella's handle was hanging on her shoulder. It turned out that in passing by, he had left the umbrella behind to shelter her crouching body.

"U-Umm..."

But his footsteps did not stop at all, neither did he look back as he left the research facility, walking in the rain.

(I forgot... to say thank you...)

She readjusted the umbrella, realizing this was only a temporary solution, but at least she could protect this stray dog from the rain for now.

Perhaps it could not be helped, she thought. He was right—no matter how much harder the rain fell, the dog could not be allowed into the lab. However, he did not ignore her, neither did he ask her to contact the Ministry of Health. This was probably the maximum extent of his kindness. Were she in his shoes and saw the same scene, what then? As one would expect, at most she would have done the same as him, most likely.



"Even so... What should I do...?"

The rain gradually became heavier. She could not move. The solitary stray dog was staring at her solitary self. She had no mother. Her father was deceased, leaving only her elder brother. Surely, this puppy did not have any family at all. All the dog had was this hand, petting its head, this girl who reached out towards it on a whim.

Unexpectedly, she heard a splash behind her.

Jumping in surprise, she looked back to see—

A man standing there, completely drenched.

"Senpai...?"

By his foot was a large vinyl bag. Judging from the logo printed on the bag, it came from a nearby home center.

Without saying a word, he knelt down and took out several things from the bag. Five wooden stakes of equal length, a bundle of vinyl string, a small sheet of blue tarp, as well as a DIY hammer. Using the hammer, he nailed four of the wooden stakes into the grass while hammering the last one arbitrarily nearby. Then he spread the tarp over the four stakes and secured it to them using the string. —Ah, so those wooden stakes were pillars, pillars for an impromptu tent.

Then he took out something else from the bag, a collar on a chain. Handing the collar to her, he said:

"It might struggle if I put it on, so you do it."

Despite feeling intrigued, she still accepted the collar. Then he turned his gaze towards the impromptu tent and muttered emphatically in a quiet voice: "Even I find this emergency solution quite terrible. I should buy some wooden planks and design a kennel tomorrow—no, if I go to the right place, there should be ready-made kennels for sale..."

Kirika finally came to a sudden realization.

She placed the collar around the puppy's neck. He (or she) accepted the collar without any resistance. Then Kirika took the ring on the other end of the chain and placed it around the other stake near the tent. Judging from the length of the chain, the puppy should be able to take shelter inside the tent.

"...This is your temporary home. I'll come over to see you again tomorrow."

She stood up and backed away slowly. The puppy kept running in circles, looking at her, but finally, it slowly entered the tent. Sitting down with its front legs stretched out together forwards, it panted with its tongue out as though saying "see you tomorrow" and curled its body slightly. Kirika finally felt relieved.

"...Go home."

Himura put the vinyl bag away, quickly turned and left. Kirika frantically ran after him. Walking beside him, she hesitated before

extending her arm, lifting the umbrella that was originally his, raising it above the head of her kind senior.

"Umm... Thank you. But why? Didn't you say no just now?"

"I didn't say no. I simply said that it can't enter the lab."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Hmm... Just on a whim."

His tone of voice remained gruff and impolite. Subconsciously, Kirika's face relaxed.

"But is it okay?"

"Who knows. Superficially, this is a pharmaceutical company's research facility. Even if a watch dog were being kept on its grounds, there's nothing strange, right?"

Speaking casually, he turned his gaze towards her. As soon as his calm gaze caught sight of her, he smiled as well.

"Besides, even if there really is a problem... Your position will come in handy when the time comes. No matter how many people complain, in the end, you only need persuade one person and the problem is resolved, right?"

"Ahaha, just leave it to me. If it's just Onii-chan alone, watch and I'll surely persuade him!"

"Is that so?" He replied briefly.

Then for quite a while, they shared an umbrella on their way home.

The next day, an ordinary kennel replaced the tent, erected on the research facility's grounds—

Kirika felt her consciousness suddenly pulled back to reality. Right now on the roof, she could hear the shouting from the sports clubs. Apparently, while recalling the past, she had somehow started spacing out... It felt like a day dream. How absolutely ridiculous.

Himura was still standing by her side. He was gazing at the scene below as though looking into the far distance. However, without being prompted by anything in particular, as though the thought suddenly occurred to him, he asked:

"By the way, Kirika... Do you still remember that puppy?"

Kirika felt her heart skip a beat. There was no need for her to mention the past she had just recalled, right?

"—No, I've forgotten."

"Is that so?"

This was both a lie and the truth. Because she had reasons for wishing to forget it. When she strongly demanded herself to stop recalling it ever again—That was equivalent to her having truly

forgotten the memory. So long as she was not possessed for an instant, or suffering a mental malfunction, recalling the memory by chance—

"That's right, put all your strength there into the pole—and vault! Oh, she failed?"

"She touched the bar slightly."

"That track and field club member failed because of that redundant mass on her chest, right? Without that excess weight, she would have jumped over it with agility... I knew it was completely useless! Not only is it an eyesore, it's also heavy and ugly to the extreme! Hey Cow Tits, as the representative of ugliness, hurry and go apologize to the track and field club member for hindering her from making new records!"

"Who is the representative of ugliness!? I have no idea why I must apologize either!"

"No, if you assume Kono-san is actually the giant boobs spirit, then all busty girls are elementalists contracted to the giant boobs spirit... Everything makes sense now! To think you caused such misfortune to a girl under your contract, you really should apologize! But putting that aside for now, O great spirit, I really wanna know how to form a contract, please tell me!"

"Hold on, Kuroe, don't get impatient. Surely she'll demand a live sacrifice as an offering. Like a head of top-grade Wagyu cattle! Faced with that staggering amount of calories, I'm trembling in fright!"

"What the heck, there's so many ridiculous things being said here, I don't even know where to start!"

"You guys seem to be having fun... Anyway, isn't it about time to go home? It's getting a bit late."

Kirika was listening inattentively to Haruaki's conversation with the girls when the fencing suddenly shook. It was Himura leaving the fence with a wry smile.

"You guys are lively as always. It's about time I get back to work as well."

As Fear and the others advanced, pushing the wheelchair, Himura's whispers seemed to be audible.

"What kind of work do you mean?"

"My work as a mathematics teacher has already ended for the day. Since I plan my work very carefully, I never need to put in overtime. Anyway, I will contact you if I receive any news about the enemy's side. Please keep the status quo and continue to take care of that girl—By the way, I forgot to ask, was Amanda living in your home yesterday?"

"Yes. Compared to Kirika's apartment, our place is bigger and more convenient in many ways. We will be taking her home today as well. Don't worry, we've been feeding her three square meals a day and the medicine as well."

"I see. Then if there's anything urgent, I will go over directly. See you tomorrow."

Himura waved his hand lightly, turned and headed to the roof's exit.

In the very last instant, Kirika felt as though Himura's gaze had met with hers. Hence, that final sentence might have been directed to her alone—But of course, Kirika ignored it completely.

Part 7

"Hey~ Time to eat... Oh crap, it's spilling out. Nu, it turns out she's not very willing to eat when I'm the one feeding her. Why?"

"You put too large a mouthful in that spoon. Reduce it slightly, like this... Eh?"

"If Kono-san is no good, it's my turn! Hmm, looks like she's not in a good mood today."

Like yesterday, the Yachi dining table was filled with dishes that could be conveniently fed to Amanda. However, feeding Amanda was not going very smoothly today.

"It shouldn't be because she's not hungry. We're eating dinner even later than last night."

Kirika commented while Haruaki crossed his arms and pondered, staring at the food on the table.

"Did I pick the wrong menu...? It's possible that there's something mixed in that she particular hates. Uh, the only dish we've yet to try is... the rice pilaf?"

Haruaki took Amanda's spoon and gently scooped a mouthful of pilaf from the plate, then tried to bring to her lips. Reflexively, she opened her mouth but stopped there.

"Hmm..." Haruaki was just about to frown when he hastily renewed his spirits. No good, at a time like this, the mood was very important for sure.

"This is food that I put a lot of effort into cooking. Through many years of research, I finally innovated this secret recipe... So, come on, have a bite and see, okay?"

Staring into Amanda's expressionless face, he smiled radiantly at her. Using his facial expression, he tried his utmost to tell her: Don't worry at all, it's really tasty.

"Oh dear~ Even with Haru's heart-warming smile, perhaps it's still a bit difficult~ Even healing beauties like us are out of ideas~"

"P-Perhaps. So, Haruaki, even if doesn't work, don't get too depressed..."

"Oh, she's eating."

Amanda opened her mouth slightly wider than before. After Haruaki gently inserted the spoon into her mouth, she began to chew. Haruaki could not help but feel delighted.

"Nuunuu... Why the shameless brat!? Clearly it didn't work for me, but she's letting you feed her so readily!"

"Hey Fear, if you speak too loudly, she might refuse to eat again . Lower your voice a bit—Konoha, could you help feed her some water?"

Konoha tilted a cup filled with water and Amanda swallowed, perhaps because liquids were easier to ingest. Guessing she had finished her water, Haruaki delivered another mouthful of pilaf. Chew chew chew. Konoha fed her water as appropriate. Gulp.

"Excellent, let's keep it up like this."

"Ah... It's a shame that she won't let me feed her, but like this... It seems like... Not bad at all. If... and I... were... to have a child, surely we would be taking care of the baby like now... Ufu, ufufu, ufufufufufu?"

For some reason, Konoha's glasses flashed while an eerie grin seemed to be hanging at the corner of her lips. Not knowing what it was about, Haruaki decided not to worry about it. After all, feeding Amanda was the current priority.

"Okay, this should be about right. I feel like I've fed her quite a lot."

Hence, Haruaki put down the spoon. Then he suddenly found Amanda to be acting not quite right. Although it was just a subtle change, her cheeks seemed a little reddened as though she were enduring something.

"Could it be that she ate too much? No... This is..."

That. As much as they took her there regularly, it was still impossible to predict exactly. Probably happy to see her willing to eat, Konoha had apparently fed her more water than usual—

"This is a crisis! Please excuse me!"

There was no time to spare. Even disengaging the wheelchair's brakes would be a waste of time. Reaching into the wheelchair's seat, Haruaki picked up Amanda's petite body. This was his first time holding her. So light.

"I realize it's an emergency! But, y-you are acting too shameless! Even if picking her up is a desperate act that cannot be helped, you ... To think you'd... take this girl to the toilet—"

"I-I'm not going that far, okay!?! I'm just moving her, that's all! I'm leaving the rest to you girls!"

Just as Haruaki was about to run out of the living room in a panic, his senses alerted him to something unusual.

—Hug.

"Eh?"

He could not help but stop and look downwards at Amanda. Expressionless. But for some reason, Amanda's arms, wrapped around his back, seemed to be... applying slightly more force.

"Haruaki, what's the matter?"

"No... Nothing... Anyway, let's move quickly!"

Running out of the living room, he made a mad dash for the washroom. He lowered the girl in his arms onto the toilet seat, but still felt a slight force from her arms around his back. This could be considered the first time for her to give a definite reaction apart from holding hands. Once he put her down, the feeling disappeared, to be honest, it felt—

"This seems... a bit... of a shame..."

As soon as he muttered softly, Haruaki felt a murderous aura behind him.

"I-I can't believe you said it was a shame! Damn you, shameless brat, what the heck are you talking about, I'll curse you!"

"Haruaki-kun~? With this, I really... cannot defend you anymore... Not only did you embrace her tightly and enter the washroom together, in the end, you even said what a shame it was—I knew it, taking care of her to the very last step are your true feelings!"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous! I will not permit this at all, there are limits to perversion!"

"No... That's not what I meant!"

His denials in vain, Haruaki was viciously kicked out of the washroom by the girls as though caught in a tornado.

Having driven Haruaki back to his own room, Kirika was sighing in the corridor. Inside the washroom, Fear and Konoha were probably shoving at each other, trying to take care of Amanda. This was the first challenge Kirika had faced on her own the first day she had to take care of Amanda. But once her panties were removed and urged with a gentle voice, she would comply definitely. Ultimately, Amanda heard their voices to some extent and probably comprehended more or less. In other words, the mental circuits, capable of manifesting these actions into a definite verbal response, were definitely shut at the moment.

"What should I do...?"

After Kirika murmured absentmindedly, Kuroe looked at her, also waiting in the corridor for Amanda and the others to return.

"By the way, Kiririn, now happens to be a good opportunity. I'd like to chat with you for a bit."

"Sure, what do you want to chat about?"

"No, it's nothing important."

Kuroe smiled gently. Nothing important—Behind these words, Kirika could feel that she wanted to discuss something serious.

"That's right, Kiririn, you've been staying over frequently at our home lately~"

"Seems so. I was also intruding here during Christmas... Sorry for causing you trouble."

"No, you're definitely not causing trouble~ I'm overjoyed that this home could become even more lively. So what I'd like to say happens to be the complete opposite."

"Complete opposite?"

Kuroe's gaze remained very gentle, the kind that she would momentarily reveal despite joking around all the time—profound eyes that were both mature and as calmly accepting of all things as the ocean.

"Indeed, it'll be very fun if you continued to live here, Kiririn—So, I was thinking. In that case, why don't you simply move in?"

Kirika held her breath. She could not say that she had never considered such a thing. Living together would be quite wonderful . Happy, joyful, blissful, able to regard the future with hope, at the same time—

It was probably going to be very painful as well.

Hence, Kirika forced a smile and said:

"Haha... I don't have a reason for living here. Besides, living with classmates under the same roof isn't befitting for a class representative."

"Reason... Huh? Not even considering your curses, Kiririn?"

Perhaps because the two of them were currently alone, Kuroe pursued the matter to the end. Hence, Kirika concluded that she could not simply gloss over the answer and must answer Kuroe properly.

"...Indeed, if I could stay in this home which possess spiritual powers of purification, perhaps the curses of my «Gimestorante's Love» and «Tragic Black River» can be lifted. However, I neither know how long that would take, and honestly speaking, nor do I believe there is any necessity to do so at the moment."

"Is that because you don't want to lose the power to protect Haru?"

"I think it's useless even if I lied to you. So—Interpret it however you wish."

Using a calm voice and expression, Kirika concealed her pounding heartbeat.

Kuroe sighed.

"How stubborn... The way I see it, I think you can live a little more true to yourself. Don't bother with complicated and difficult concepts like necessity. Don't go worrying about Ficchi or Kono-san. Just do what you want to do the most—"

"I am currently doing what I want to do."

How stubborn... Kuroe murmured again. The smile on her face seemed to read "you leave me no choice" while helplessly tolerating a willful child.

"Then let me ask you a final question, but it's fine if you don't answer. However, I hope you can think about it carefully inside—In other words, Kiririn, for the next step, do you plan on keeping this up indefinitely?"

This simple question ended up weighing exceptionally heavily in Kirika's heart.

For the next step. In other words, the future. Who knows. What was going to happen? What did she want to do—?

The sound of flushing came from the washroom.

Instantly, Kuroe returned to her usual tone of voice, even more crazy than usual:

"Yes, this secret discussion has come to a conclusion with perfect timing. Then let it be so—Basically, let me make myself clear, if anything troubles you, please feel free to discuss with me any time."

The heavy atmosphere was instantly released by her excessively lighthearted tone of voice. This was probably one of her strengths—Kirika thought. Switching seamlessly between seriousness and nonseriousness at will.

Kirika smiled wryly while saying:

"How troubling... Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"I am standing on everyone's side."

Having probably seen through everything, she continued to reply in a lighthearted tone of voice.

Part 8

During the leisure period after dinner, Fear was staring unproductively at a variety show on the television. The show's contents did not seem to be getting through to her mind—because there was too much to think about.

She slightly shifted her gaze away from the television over to Amanda on the wheelchair. Amanda was essentially sitting facing the television but Fear could not be certain if she actually watched the show.

Fear recalled the scene of their first encounter. Back then, she had just arrived at this home, still unsure of what she wanted and had no idea what she should do next.

That was why she laughed like a maniac on that roof, swallowed by her memories, harmed Peavey and even tried to kill Haruaki, then she jumped into the sea—

I really did a whole bunch of stupid things—Fear smiled wryly.

Looking at Amanda made Fear recall her own stupidity from that time. However, precisely because of that—

(Compared to back then... It's already quite different.)

Her wish was now very clear. She did not want to hurt anyone. She wished to lift her curse and become like a human, not hurting anyone, a being able to rescue others.

Currently before her eyes, Amanda was causing her to recall her past guilt. Then as long as she protected Amanda and helped her mind to recover, this would be able to prove that "now" and "back then" were different—proving that she had conquered the past. Fear had this kind of feeling.

(Then... I'll protect her... The "now" that I'm striving towards.)

After defeating the enemy who wanted Amanda dead, Fear just needed to wait until her mind recovered. After that, it would be nice to try having a chat with her as Fear suggested yesterday in the bathroom. Once Himura found a safe medical facility, although it might take a long time, she should recover one day.

(Speaking of which, there was that mention of the enemy possessing "a tool for healing minds." If that thing is useful, it could cure her immediately. But being a cursed tool after all, I'd better not put too much hopes in it. Rather than trying to steal that tool, protecting Amanda should come first.)

Fear suddenly noticed that the blanket wrapped around Amanda's thighs had slid off, so she reached out and gently covered her again. Having confirmed once more what she needed to do henceforth, Fear felt her mood brighten unbelievably. Feeling much relieved, the sounds of the television finally started registering in her mind somewhat—

'So! Next is the Valentine's special programme, unbelievably, this time it's—'

"...Oh."

Fear had forgotten that she still had that problem to handle. Meanwhile, Kuroe was napping on the tatami floor and Kirika was staring at the television. Fear brought her lips next to Kirika's ear and murmured:

"By the way, Kirika, can we still find time to practice?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'm not sure either. Judging from the current situation, it might be quite hard. However... Whether that guy finds a hospital or the enemy attacks, it shouldn't take too long. Before Valentine's Day arrives, everything should be settled... That's what I'm hoping."

"Yeah, then I'll try to be patient for now. Oh yeah, I recently realized something very important, basically what kind of chocolate to give Haruaki. According to my wide-range observations throughout daily life, that guy typically snacks on either red bean jelly^[3] and potato chips, or stealing my rice

crackers from the side—In other words, he doesn't seem to have a thing for chocolate, right? That's a very serious situation!"

"Hmm... That's probably common for the majority of boys. But since he eats red bean jelly, that means he doesn't hate sweets at least. Besides, there are still other choices like giving him dark chocolate which isn't particularly sweet."

"That's quite deep. Which kind of chocolate should I make... Perfect, let's watch this show as research."

The issue of Amanda could not be overlooked, but Fear must also give consideration to her own problems. Stretching out, Fear focused her gaze on the television show.

The host on screen said: 'Come, everyone, have a taste of this specially made chocolate! Never in your wildest dreams would you expect to draw the special wasabi flavor!'...

Oh~ So there's this flavor as well. Judging from the name, it shouldn't be too sweet, probably. Since the host was grinning from ear to ear while speaking and the comedian who drew the chocolate looked quite happy, the flavor must be nice, right?

Very well—Fear mentally added it to her list of choices.

At the same time, Haruaki was washing dishes in the kitchen with Konoha. Originally, Fear and Kirika had offered to help but too many people would get in one another's way, so they ended

up deciding with rock-paper-scissors. That said, why was it the winner who got to wash the dishes...? Haruaki did not feel that washing dishes together with him was that fun an activity.

But in fact, Konoha was currently humming happily while washing dishes. Yes, compared to someone helping reluctantly, this was much better, of course... Thinking that, Haruaki continued with the dishes. From the living room, he could hear what sounded like Fear and the others whispering, plus the Valentine's show on television at the same time...

(...Oh.)

That prompted Haruaki to finally understand. Speaking of which, it was definitely that time of the year again. The recent restless atmosphere in the entire school was probably due to this as well. Once that day arrived, Taizou and the other boys were surely going to shout noisily: "That girl gave me chocolate!" "No, I didn't even get a single one. I won't forgive you!" To begin with, Haruaki was not one to mind the amount of chocolate he received, but the lively mood coming from the television was causing him to space out and wonder.

If someone gave me chocolate, who will it be? For sure, it'll all be courtesy chocolate, so probably limited to the female friends whom I converse with on a daily basis. Fear most likely doesn't even understand the festival's inherent meaning; Kirika would probably say "absolutely ridiculous," expressing complete disinterest; if Shiraho gave me chocolate, I'd better seriously consider the necessity of testing for poison. Sovereignty would probably be airheaded enough to forget the chocolate at home,

while Kana had always been one of those people who passed out Tirol chocolate to everyone since middle school—

(Then the only ones likely to give me chocolate like a normal person would be Kuroe and... Konoha... Right?)

Haruaki turned his gaze to the side. Next to him was Konoha, happily washing the dishes, always giving him handmade chocolate every year. At this moment, she suddenly said: "Oh, excuse me." Then she reached for the detergent in front of Haruaki. Due to bending forward, her bosom wobbled and shook slightly—Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away. But for some reason, that scene kept getting replayed in his mind nonstop. Slight shaking. A round bulge, looking soft yet warm. Texture as though capable of accepting everything. It was quite late to say at this point, but Haruaki admitted that not only did Konoha have a great figure, but she was also smart and very kind. One would expect many people to want to give her chocolate. And currently, someone like her was right by his side, smiling happily, reaching forward to put away a dish, her bosom quivering again—

At this moment, Konoha looked at Haruaki and spoke as though she had suddenly recalled something:

"Uh, Haruaki-kun, is it okay if I leave the rest of the dishes to you? I need to go prepare the bath."

She was smiling very radiantly. Haruaki could not help but feel his heart pounding.

"S-Sure, thanks for your help."

He stammered in reply. "Then I'm counting on you for the remainder." Saying that, Konoha walked to the bathroom. Not long after that, Haruaki finished the dishes as well. Then just as he was leaving the kitchen, he seemed to hear his name being called somewhere. Tracing the sound to the source, in other words, the changing area, he checked and—

"...Haruaki... kun, umm... Could you come in briefly?"

This time, he heard his name being called definitely. Konoha's voice sounded quite nervous, as though she were suppressing some kind of emotion. Haruaki entered the changing area and asked:

"What's up? There's no hot water?"

"S-Something like that... In any case, please... come in..."

Haruaki listened to her answer through the bathroom's glass door. On the other hand, he kept getting the feeling that something was not right about the changing area. Hmm? Haruaki tilted his head in puzzlement, then slid the glass door open without thought —

Then instantly, he froze completely.

He was struck by a very rich and sweet fragrance. A second later, he finally realized what was unusual about the changing area . It was this smell drifting into there. Ah, not only that. He traced

back his memories. There were clothes in the female laundry basket in the changing area. Konoha's clothes. That also contributed to his feeling of dissonance. In other words—

Konoha was currently nude.

"Umm... Haruaki... kun..."

"W-What? No, sorry, anyway, I'm very sorry!"

"Wait! Don't... go..."

Haruaki halted himself just as he was turning and could not help but see.

Konoha was kneeling with her knees together on the center of the bathroom floor, sporting twin braids and glasses as always. Undressed, her body was presenting its womanly and voluptuous curves without any reserve at all. Luckily, the critical areas remained out of sight, just barely. This was partially due to Konoha, blushing intensely, covering herself with both arms ineffectually, but more importantly, because—

It was also the reason why the bathroom was filled with the sweet aroma. This was because very delicious looking chocolate was currently smeared over the critical locations of Konoha's body.

"K-Konoha... W-What on earth is this?"

"Must I really spell it out... in order for you to understand...?"

With large, watery eyes, she looked up at Haruaki, straightened her back, lifted her torso and shifted her arm away slightly. Ahhh, *that* was now exposed even more clearly in his view—

"This is... Valentine's... chocolate... This year... is special."

"S-Special...!"

"I specially prepared this... to make you... happy, Haruaki-kun. Made with very... very... great dedication... So... it's very delicious.. . Yes, so..."

Konoha spoke with an inexplicably high-pitched voice. Without sitting up, she slowly extended her hands towards Haruaki. Then wrapping her hands around the back of his neck lightly, she pulled him towards her.

"Woaaaaaaah!"

Incomparably soft.

Pulled, Haruaki fell over forwards, his face landing on some... something gentle. The sweet aroma was at the tip of his nose.

Konoha still had her arms around the back of Haruaki's neck, her eyes moist, her face bright red, her breath hot.

"Please... Could you..."

Then whispering softly:

"Could you... lick... my chocolate...?"

Haruaki's mind went blank from the sweet aroma, completely unable to think. Konoha tightened her arms faintly but irresistibly, bringing his head even nearer. Cocoa and milk's aroma, aroma, aroma aroma aroma. Indeed, it looked quite delicious. Haruaki salivated greatly. In fact, it must be very tasty without a doubt, tasty things were supposed to be eaten—

Instinctively trying to imagine a taste he had never savored before, Haruaki subconsciously breathed out. Perhaps upon feeling the wind of his breath, the chocolate before his eyes—

"Ah... Yah, mmm..."

Giving off a burning hot moan, she shuddered once. Living chocolate, delicious-looking chocolate. If he did not eat it, perhaps it would be an affront to the confectionery chef who had created this chocolate. Hence—

Hence, Haruaki opened his mouth slightly, his mind in a haze.

Then slowly, slowly, he extended his tongue, wet with saliva, towards there—

Haruaki suddenly woke to a start.

"Woooooaaaaaaaah!"

"Kya? W-Watch out—!"

The instant Haruaki regained his senses, the dish he was washing slipped from his hand. Naturally, Konoha had not gone to the bathroom while claiming to prepare the bath, neither had she prepared chocolate in the bathroom. Still washing dishes, Konoha swiftly reached out and caught the dish.

Heart pounding like mad, Haruaki looked around in the kitchen and instantly realized. A delusion—To think he was having delusions? How did this happen? Was the culprit the result of looking at that wobbling bosom? No, he could not lay the blame on others. In any case, to think he would... To think he would have that kind of delusion... Too abnormal. Seriously... too abnormal.

"Haruaki-kun, what's the matter with you? You even made a strange scream."

"No... Uh, i-it's—It's that. Because it slipped from my hand, I was worried if the dish would fall and break, so I couldn't help it..."

"I remember the scream coming first... Never mind, in any case, thank goodness it didn't fall and break. This is quite rare for you to have this sort of accident, Haruaki-kun."

Konoha smiled tenderly. Her innocent and smiling face brought a stinging pain in Haruaki's heart, guilty from the delusion.

"S-Sorry."

"? There's no need to apologize to me with your face red. Everyone has accidents, besides, the dish wasn't broken either."

"No, even so, umm... Uh..."

Naturally, he was unable to explain, not daring to stare straight into Konoha's eyes. Hence, Haruaki poured forth his full sincerity and spoke again:

"I-I am sorry."

Of course, Konoha simply inclined her head in puzzlement.

Part 9

The next day after school, Haruaki's group was going home together. Like the day before, Kuroe spent the daytime at the superintendent's office, taking care of Amanda, with neither problems nor apparent progress. Apart from mathematics class, they did not see Himura again either, thus suggesting no progress on his end either.

Instead of heading home directly, they took a tour of the surroundings. Today, Kuroe was responsible for pushing Amanda's wheelchair while Fear was holding a book she had bought at a bookstore along the way, frowning deeply while staring at the pages. Not only did she cover up the exterior, but she had also chosen the book secretly with Kirika, so Haruaki had no idea about the book's title or genre.

"To think you're reading a book, how rare. What is it?"

"Nuu. Secret, it's a secret! I can tell others but not you!"

"Why?"

"Shut up! Don't ask anymore, I'll curse you! Jeez... But I never knew there could be so many varieties... Which should I pick? Hmm..."

Fear turned her gaze back to the book and murmured to herself. Oh well, reading a book was not a bad thing after all. In any case, Haruaki decided not to pursue further regarding the book's contents and simply gave an honest warning: "Reading while walking is very dangerous." But just as expected, he was cruelly ignored.

But soon after, Fear closed the book shut and placed it in her schoolbag. This was definitely not because his warning finally worked after a delay but simply because she tired of it.

"Hmm, how difficult... I'll read the rest at home. Speaking of which..."

Fear glanced towards Amanda.

"Wasn't the bookstore stimulating enough? There were so many fun-looking books inside."

"Yeah. To me, it's quite a shame I wasn't able to visit the most stimulating zone."

"How could you be allowed there!?"

"The most stimulating type of book...? I don't get what you're getting at, Kuroe, but books are simply books, right? I don't really think there could be too big of an effect. Is there anything more stimulating?"

Fear surveyed her surroundings while speaking, then went "Oh!" and stopped walking, looking towards the side of the road.

"There's a park. Why don't we play there for a bit?"

"Oh~ Returning to childlike fancies on occasion seems like a good idea. Playing together in a lively manner, or watching us play, perhaps Ama-chan might be more energetic."

"What do you mean by 'occasional,' why do I feel like you always have nothing but childlike fancies, Kuroe-san... Hmm, whatever."

"I don't mind either. I didn't even know of this park before."

"Same here. Looks like there are quite a lot of leisure facilities~"

Hence, the group filed into the park. Although smaller than a baseball field, it was large enough for a three-player game of catch. The park contained sand pits, monkey bars, an elephant-shaped slide and swings, a full set of basic leisure facilities. In a corner on the far end, there was also a drinking fountain combined with a large clock stand.

There were already some people playing in the park, a few kids and a brown-haired girl, probably the elder sister of one of them. Probably playing tag, the group was running around, making a lot of noise.

Trying not to get in their way, Haruaki's group first headed over to the swings. Putting Amanda on a swing, they rocked her gently while making sure she did not fall off. Swaying the iron chains, Haruaki exchanged glances with Kirika who was supporting Amanda's arms.

"...How should I describe this? Somehow, it feels... very lonely..."

"I get the same feeling too. But it can't be helped. It's not like we can be like Fear."

"Ahaha~! Amanda, do you see!? This is really very fun, if you're jealous, hurry and get well, at least well enough to play on a swing!"

Fear was standing on the adjacent swing, showing off swinging upright, swaying backwards and forwards forcefully. "What's this? A display stand for decapitation? Or a relative of the guillotine's? I never knew that this country has a culture of public executions as well!" Fear had said that the first time she saw a swing, but by now she was very experienced with them.

"Fear, don't swing too hard, it's dangerous! Rather, umm, you're currently wearing a skirt...!"

"This stimulating sensation is the whole point of fun on a swing. I want to go even higher~!"

"Like I said, hold your horses! You are also being stimulating in a different sense!"

Perhaps because she was trying to make a display of her joyful form in an effort to stimulate Amanda, Fear did not relent in her vigor. She swung high, fast and boldly. Her head of silver hair glittering brightly, she became a pendulum herself. To be honest, the sight was very pretty. Perhaps also because of that—

"Wow~! That foreigner missy is so amazing..." "Doesn't she get scared?"

The kids who had been playing tag in the park were apparently drawn to Fear and approaching, their eyes glimmering as they watched Fear trace out arcs in the air.

"Hohoho... Those who recognize my skills know what they're talking about...!"

Fear grinned at them while increasing her swinging speed, getting even more carried away. Were she to speed up further, it really looked like she was going to make a 360-degree full revolution. However, that did not seem to be the ending that the kids wanted.

"I-Is she going to fly? Will she fly?"

"The foreigner missy definitely can fly very far away! She's most likely a gymnast!"

"Uh, umm, dear children... Excuse me, but that idiot missy really might end up doing that after listening to your commotion, so—"

Just as Konoha spoke to the kids with a stiff smile, in that very instant—

Twang! The swing swayed greatly then—

"I must respond to expectations... Watch! Here I go~!"

"She flew~!" "So amazing!"

Under the children's amazed gazes, silver hair fluttered in the air. Perhaps incited to a good mood, Fear even went as far to somersault in the air, holding her knees to her chest while rotating—silver, stripes, silver, stripes, these two colors alternated in Haruaki's view while Fear traced out a perfect parabola, landing on her feet—

"Yeah! Kids, did you see that!? Please offer your generous applause of praise... Woah?"

Perhaps due to jumping too forcefully, Fear's landing failed a little. Just as she slipped, the lead girl who had been playing with the kids, arrived chasing after the kids, panting heavily—

"Huff... Ooh... Wait up... You guys, I'm so happy you didn't flee and waited for me. But Onee-san is pretty much 'it,' so if you act too casual, Onee-san's pride will get hurt, will *HEART BREAK*... Ooph!"

The girl running weakly collided with Fear who had lost her balance. Then the two of them collapsed, all entangled together.

"Kyu..."

"Nuu. What happened...? Anyway, looks like I didn't achieve a perfect ten. What a shame."

"Hey Fear! Now's not the time to be saying what a shame! I knew this was going to happen!"

"Uh.. This is... because they were looking forward to it, so I had no choice... Muguu!? Damn you, shameless brat, you dared to hit my head! I'll curse you!"

Haruaki decided it was appropriate to give her a bit of educational punishment given the circumstances. After a knock on Fear's head, he lifted her up by the collar to right her stance. At this moment, Fear finally seemed to realize what had happened after her failed landing.

"Muu... Did I hit this girl? I'm really sorry. Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, umm, we're very sorry! A-Are you alright?"

"Hmm...?"

Haruaki examined the girl's appearance. She was roughly the same age as them. On her head, she was wearing a cute knit cap with long ear flaps. The ear flaps were curled up slightly, revealing wires and headphones on her ears underneath. She was probably listening to music at a low volume. Her outfit consisted of a t-shirt, a hoodie together with a fluttery miniskirt, overall quite convenient to move around in. A pair of bare, snow-white legs extended from beneath her skirt down to her sneakers, no socks, giving an impression of convenient mobility yet vulnerable at the same time. Combined with the fact that she had fallen and was currently sprawled on the ground, between her bare thighs and miniskirt was—

Feeling murderous intent, Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away so quickly that he almost broke his neck. After evacuating his view, he happened to find Konoha slowly raising both hands. Smiling at him, she lowered her hands lightly at the same time. What a close call.

Sensing the girl sitting up with a rustle, Haruaki turned his gaze back towards her. The girl was sitting listlessly on the ground, her head cocked in puzzlement: "What just happened...?" Hence, Haruaki asked:

"Umm... Sorry about that, are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"Eh? Oh—I'm probably... okay. Yes, don't worry! This is totally the *GOODEST!*"

The girl smiled demurely while using incorrect English. Her smile was quite dazzling. Then patting her bottom, the girl stood up. Probably due to wearing a knit cap with ear flaps, she gave an impression like a rabbit's—The cap could very well be modeled on a rabbit's design as its prototype.

"Really? It's great that you're unhurt. Sorry, I accidentally went too far in my playing around."

Fear could not help but make an apologetic expression, scratching her face while saying sorry. But the girl replied cheerfully:

"No no! It's my fault for not looking ahead! The same goes for both of us!"

This doesn't really count as the same for both of them—Haruaki thought... But of course, this was much better than angering or hurting the other person. Just as he felt relieved, he saw the children crowding around Fear one after another.

"So amazing! Missy, you're so amazing! Swinging back and forth just now!"

"Hey hey, missy, do you know other tricks? Show us!"

"Ah... Cough cough, since I'm a professional after all, I can't go around showing off my ultimate moves so easily. Consider the performance just now a special service and that's it for now."

"Eh~" The kids yelled with dissatisfaction. Fear glanced at Haruaki. Naturally, he returned a warning gaze. Allowing her to do anything like that again would be unacceptable.

"Do not keep insisting on unreasonable demands. Okay okay, it's time to continue the game of tag! I'm gonna catch you all~!"

"Eh~ But Nee-san, you're already out of strength. Your fleeing speed is still okay, but you're too weak as 'it.' The game's not working out at all."

"Eh~!? *SHOCKING~!*"

At this moment, one of the kids said:

"Oh right! Hey hey, foreigner missy, why don't you join our game as well!?"

"Hmm? Well..."

Fear was still thinking when the rabbit-like girl grabbed her hand and spoke with serious eyes:

"You must join in! These kids can't be allowed to look down on adults, let's show them the power of adults! Make them eat their words!"

"Uh, I think you're the only one getting looked down on... Hmm , but after all, I did cause you trouble, so playing a short while should be fine. Haruaki, may I?"

"Yeah... Nothing wrong with that."

There were limits to how much the wheelchair-bound Amanda could play. In that case, just as Fear mentioned earlier, letting her see them play happily might be a way to give her stimulation.

Since Kirika offered to take care of Amanda on the swing, Haruaki and the rest began to join the kids and the girl in their game.

First, they resumed the game of tag they had been playing. But the girl acting as 'it' was sluggish to the point that it was heartbreaking. Too pitiful. Why don't I deliberately let her catch me? Just as Haruaki thought that, one of the kids gathered everyone for an emergency meeting and suggested modifying the rules.

"Takaoni... If forced to translate it, I'd say it's High Ogre! Sounds so powerful! Then what's the game like?"

"I don't know either. How is it different from playing tag?"

"So missies, you don't know anything. Uh, the rules are like this —"

The one being 'it' was not allowed to touch someone who was above ground level. However, the players are not allowed to stay in one spot either. Once locked on by the 'it,' they were forced to be 'it' after ten seconds.

"Muuumuu. Once locked on, the player must escape to a higher elevation, so the 'it' only needs to figure out which direction the player will run and guard it... Nuufu, sounds doable! I won't let you guys off so easily anymore like just now!"

The game restarted with the girl's vigorous shout. Despite locking on to various targets, she still failed to catch them, but just as she predicted, she soon caught one of the kids. When it was Konoha's turn, she caught people gently. Standing on the top of the slide, Fear laughed heartily and audaciously, but ended up slipping accidentally and sliding down and was easily caught. As for Kuroe... "Strange? Where did the tiny missy go?" "Hoho... Looking for me?" "I can't believe you're on a tree! How did you climb up there?" Thus, the game continued in this manner. Finally, it became Haruaki's turn to be "it."

Playing with kids was truly exhausting for the mind and body. One could not be serious but holding back too much would take out the fun for the kids. In all sorts of ways, it was very draining.

After several kids escaped from him, Haruaki wiped sweat off his brow and surveyed the park.

"Phew. Uh, who might be a better target...?"

Fear was standing one-legged on a tire that was half-buried in the ground. Konoha was staying on the slide together with the other kids while Kuroe was hanging on a low branch overhead with her hands—

"Crap, *DANGER!* Our eyes met!"

That girl was on the monkey bars. Haruaki really wished she could pay more attention to her miniskirt where she wore nothing underneath apart from panties. Should he target her? What should he do? Even though Haruaki was still thinking, the girl began to get nervous and climbed down frantically. Unexpectedly, she slipped—

"...Oh my?"

Although she did not hit the ground, the situation was perhaps even worse. Her entire body upside down, she was entangled in the monkey bars' frame in a complicated manner, especially with her legs open towards the sky—

"Wait... Time out, time out~! I'm stuck! Oh my... Oh my my? Over here... should—Are you actually planning on targeting a poor defenseless girl who cannot move!? Stop it, don't target me! You're a complete demon, an ogre!"

"Mister, hurry~!" "Get her~!" The kids' yells came one after another, but no matter what, Haruaki still had what was called a warrior's mercy. Furthermore, Konoha and the other girls were making scary gazes.

If he were to target the lively yet sluggish girl, surely he would be able to quickly get out of being 'it'—But since she was too sluggish, Haruaki could not bring himself to do it. It looked like he had no choice but to continue running around as 'it' for a while longer.

Sighing, Haruaki ignored the unsightly girl on the monkey bars and slowly began to search for other prey.

Drenched in sweat after all this fun and games, it was almost sunset. One of the kids suddenly yelled:

"Oh no! That clock isn't even moving!"

Hearing him say that, the other kids screamed in dismay one after another.

"Eh, seriously! I'm in trouble!" "Hey mister, you got a watch?"

"No watch, but I do have a cellphone. Have a look."

"Uwah... I'm so dead, it's already past dinner time. Mom will be so mad... I'd better get home!"

"Same here! Why is the clock broken today!?"

"Bye bye, missies! Let's play again another time!"

Apparently, though the kids were able to fearlessly play with Fear and the others despite their unusual appearances, curfews were even more frightening. The kids all rushed out of the park and vanished like a puff of smoke.

"Oh, see you next time~" Fear waved her hand while seeing them off, looking up at the clock in the park.

"It's definitely broken. The glass is shattered too. Did someone throw a rock? Now it's useless and just taking up space."

"YES. A clock must move after all. Once it stops, only then do people realize its importance."

The girl was nodding her head with a solemn expression. Kirika moved Amanda from the swing back to her wheelchair and pushed her over.

"Hmm...? You don't need to go home? Seeing you get along with them so well, I was sure you would be one of the kids' older sister or relative."

"No, not at all. It's my first time meeting those kids today. Getting along with others just happens to be my strength."

"I won't lose in terms of getting along with them." Fear declared proudly with her chest puffed out. In response, Konoha remarked with slight exasperation:

"It's not like that's something especially worth being proud of. I was thinking it was simply because your mental age is roughly the same as those kids."

"What did you say!?"

"Anyway, we're heading home, what about you?"

"Hmm~ I can't go back yet, because I still have work to do~"

The girl answered energetically. With an innocent look, a look completely devoid of malice.

At the same time, she was smiling radiantly.

"After all, it's not a good influence if I destroyed and slaughtered my targets in front of kids, right? Now that I've waited so long for the kids to leave, I must do a bit of work."

"—!"

Fear and the girls reacted quite swiftly. As alarm appeared on their faces, they shielded Amanda and the wheelchair behind them. Konoha stepped forward and pushed Haruaki lightly. Only then did he finally move and retreated in surprise. Impossible. Unbelievable. The girl who had been playing together with them, both laid back, cheerful, lively yet a bit sluggish, the girl whom they had not sensed any hostility coming from her at all—

"...The Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion?"

Fear asked while fishing out her Rubik's cube. The girl nodded simply.

"YES. Elsie-san's name is Hinai Elsie. My purpose is destroying you, Fear-in-Cube—as well as eliminating this Mummy Maker here. In order to maintain internal discipline within the Knights Dominion and to prevent the leak of information, the higher-ups

basically ordered the execution of the useless auxiliary who was captured by the Lab Chief's Nation."

"You should understand after seeing her, right? It's currently impossible to get any information out of this girl. That's exactly why the Lab Chief's Nation gave up protecting her. Even so, you still want to kill her?"

"Of course, because it's Elsie-san's responsibility. Work must be approached seriously."

After hearing Kirika's words, the girl—Elsie—remained unmoved. Was a fight unavoidable?

A period of silence descended on this deserted park with sunset imminent.

Just at this moment, someone's cellphone suddenly rang. Pushing the wheelchair while keeping an eye on Elsie's movements, Kirika took out her cellphone and narrowed her eyes after glancing at the screen.

"Feel free to pick up the call. I don't mind waiting this little bit of time."

The cellphone continued to ring. Kirika hesitated for a moment before picking up finally.

"...Are you asking about the current situation? Absolutely ridiculous—Allow me to tell you. We are currently facing off against a girl from the Knights Dominion called Hinai Elsie. She's right in front of us."

Kirika spoke in exasperation and frowned after hearing the response.

"Hey. What do you mean by hitting the jackpot on what you hoped would not be true—What... was that?"

Several seconds passed.

Absolutely ridiculous—Kirika murmured softly and hung up the phone gruffly.



"Class Rep, was that... Himura-sensei just now?"

"I must have mentioned before, there's no need to add the 'sensei' honorific. Yes, whatever, you're right that he's the one who just called, reporting useless information: 'The enemy has landed in the country apparently.' Then—he had also learnt of the enemy's name, albeit not completely convinced. Now that he knows the person is in front of us, he told me even more useless information."

"...What did he say?"

Haruaki asked while feeling unusual vibes from Kirika. After hanging up, Kirika did not let Elsie out of her sight at all. She was clenching her fists and giving off a sense of tension. Perspiration appeared on her forehead.

"I'll repeat his words verbatim. This is what he said—"

Still maintaining the aforementioned state, Kirika smiled.

...It was most likely a forced smile.

"Hinai Elsie is known as the «Strongest»—You have no chance of winning, so hurry and escape."

Part 10

Elsie's shoulders shook as she giggled.

"Absolutely the *GOODEST*! That's really correct advice, but I have no intention of letting you escape."

"What a joker that man is, how would I know if we don't try? And you, speak properly!"

"Eh~ Elsie-san is speaking properly. In other words, this is *GOODEST SPEAKING*."

"You don't have to repeat so deliberately! Arghh, how could this airheaded girl be called the strongest—Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator», Curse Calling!"

"I feel the same way. Try my super move, uh... *ALWAYS KILL SKILL* explosion..."

"You don't have to try to compete with her. That makes you look totally like a comedian. In any case—Haruaki-kun and Ueno-san, please step back. I'll leave Amanda in your hands."

Saying that, Fear and Konoha stepped forward. Kuroe stood behind them to be able to support the two girls while guarding Haruaki and the rest from projectile attacks.

Fear raised the drill up high while Konoha readied her knife hand. Watching these two, the enemy remained unfazed.

"Wow~ *BRAVE HEART*. How courageous. Then Elsie-san will begin preparations."

She reached into the collar of her t-shirt and pulled out something. Roughly palm-sized, the object was an antique-looking pocket watch on a silver chain. The watch shone with golden luster and intricate engravings could be seen decorating its surface.

Then Elsie grabbed the watch stem and turned it by one revolution.

Quiet ticking started, then in the next instant—

"Ah, mmm..."

Elsie's shoulders shook as though an electrical current had passed through her entire body. Then she continued to slowly wind the watch, winding, winding, causing her body to tremble nonstop every time.

"Mmm... A-Ah... Kyafuun... Almost... th-here... *ECSTASY!*"

Her mouth half-open, eyes glazed, she kept winding the watch

But after a while, the pocket watch gave off a louder click and the watch stem could no longer be turned further apparently. Elsie suddenly looked normal again.

"Ah, it can only go this far after all? I dunno if it'll be enough... Whatever, anyway, I won't know until I try, yes."

"Is that a cursed pocket watch? At a glance, you don't look like you have other weapons. Neither do I know what abilities you have, but don't think you can defeat us with that thing—"

"Oh sorry. I don't have time, so here I go."

Instantly, two things happened simultaneously.

First of all, Elsie suddenly vanished from view.

Secondly, Fear's body was sent flying to the side.

"Wha...!"

Konoha readjusted her stance with an expression of shock. Elsie was now beside her where Fear had been standing.

—A second later, there was a loud crash. Having been sent flying silently, Fear now crashed into the monkey bars directly, instantly deforming the frame. Collapsing sprawled, Fear remained motionless.

"Fear!"

What just happened? Haruaki finally realized what he had sensed vaguely just now, something that he only sensed very vaguely. The reason was simple. Rather than vanishing, Elsie was simply moving fast enough for others to mistake her for vanishing, unnatural speed that was akin to fastforwarding a video, then

casually delivering a hook towards Fear's gut. Simply by doing that, she effortlessly sent Fear flying despite what should have been a heavy and sturdy body.

"You... This girl—"

"A knife hand stance? Compared to the knife hand, Elsie-san prefers the knife finger. Isn't this cooler? Look, *COOL!*"

Konoha swung her karate chop at close range but Elsie did as claimed and blocked the attack simply by sticking up her index and middle fingers.

"No way... Come on! A mere human's body, how could it be possible... I failed to slice through...!"

Konoha groaned. In contrast, Elsie swung her right hand's knife finger towards Konoha to counterattack. As expected of unnatural speed that was almost impossible for the eye to follow. Haruaki could feel it even when watching from a distance. Surely, Konoha must be experiencing much higher speeds up close.

Thrice. Despite being highly experienced in battles, Konoha only managed to exchange three blows against this level of high speed.

"Wow! To think you're able to exchange blows thrice with Elsie-san, how rare! *EXCELLENT!*"

Konoha was unable to block the fourth strike. Piercing Konoha's defense, Elsie stabbed her upper arm. In the next instant, Konoha's clothing was dyed by the red color she abhorred.

"Guh... Ah...!"

"Here's another!"

Immediately, Elsie swung her fist at the stomach of the immobilized Konoha. With abnormal speed and power, the petite fist made a depression in Konoha's belly, causing her to moan even more painfully before flying backwards, getting caught up in the chains of the swing where Amanda was sitting earlier.

"That child asked just now, what abilities I have, right? But it's hard to answer because it's too simple. Basically, Elsie-san is strong because Elsie-san is strong!"

Elsie spoke while her miniskirt fluttered as she jumped towards the collapsed Konoha. Then using the speed of the descent, she swung both her fists together. Alarmed, Konoha yelled out:

"Guh... Sever... completely!"

Manifesting a blade's sharpness all over her body, Konoha severed all the chains of the swing she was entangled in. Caught in the effects, her uniform was instantly shredded but there was no time to be concerned about that. Konoha swiftly rolled to the side and evaded Elsie's hammering fists. In her stead, the ground suffered an absurd depression.

Just as Elsie was about to attack in pursuit, taking advantage of Konoha losing balance—

"Mode: «Penetrator Yoshimasa»!"

Kuroe's hair extended like spears, attacking mercilessly. If her attack landed, she could probably gouge holes into the enemy's body with penetrative power rivaling Fear's drill, but—

"Hey! Because there's no time, you're becoming quite an eyesore!"

"...!"

Elsie agilely dodged the spears of hair, but not only that, she also clamped a bundle of hair under her arm and leaned back, pulling the hair forcefully. Then with a mighty swing, she sent Kuroe flying, hair and all. Probably too fast for Kuroe to disable the hardening, the hair acted as the string of a pendulum in sending Kuroe flying into the air, vanishing into a forest outside the park. Then came the sound of branches breaking and leaves rustling before silence returned. Only after the spear-shaped hair lost its hardness did it fall to the ground like black ribbons.

"I can't believe... even Kuroe-san..!"

"I don't think you have time to worry about others right now~!"

Elsie spoke energetically and attacked Konoha who was getting up unsteadily. This time, Konoha only managed to block her attack once. The reason was obvious. After blocking once, Konoha turned

towards Haruaki as though her face was desperately saying "there are more important things than defense"—Yelling loudly:

"P-Please hurry and escape! Haruaki-kun, Ueno-san!"

"To think you'd do this in the middle of battle... This is totally your *MISTAKE*!"

Elsie unleashed a spinning kick faster than the eye could follow, striking Konoha in the head and sending her entire body flying far away, creating a cloud of dust. With such apparent destructive power, Konoha was unable to get up at all—

Watching in stunned disbelief, Kirika suddenly regained her senses and spoke to Haruaki. Shoving the wheelchair's handles into Haruaki's hands, she stepped forward to protect them.

"Yachi! You hurry and go, leave it to me to stop—"

"—You can't stop me."

Stab.

Haruaki heard such a sound.

Ahhh, Kirika was standing there, maintaining the same pose as when she took her step forward. Elsie was right in front of her. However, why—*Why was Elsie's arm piercing out of Kirika's back?*

"Ah... Huh...?"

After approaching with unnatural speed, Elsie spoke in an inexplicably gentle voice:

"No matter what, human cannot do it. You cannot keep up with Elsie-san's movements while Elsie-san's power can penetrate even a Wathe's defense to damage the Wathe. Of course you should have expected this with just an ordinary human body."

"Hurry... Escape..."

"Oh my?"

Kirika extended the belt slowly from her right arm, entangling Elsie's arm that was piercing her body. Then she reached out with a trembling hand and grabbed Elsie's wrist.

"C-Class Rep..."

"Haha, you want to let him and Mummy Maker escape together ? Amazing. Amazing. Also, I already know. You're wearing a Wathe of immortality, right? That's why you intended to do this... But is it really okay? A simple thrust already skewered your body like this. If Elsie-san moves this arm downwards, your body will be split into half to the crotch. At the same time, your clothes will break along with it... You could very well die."

Haruaki could not see Kirika's face. However—After hearing Elsie's words, he felt his heart stop for an instant. No way. That absolutely cannot be allowed!

"S-Stop it—I beg you, stop!"

"Yes. I understand how you feel. But sorry, no can do."

Elsie crushed Haruaki's pleas without mincing any words. Haruaki felt his view darken as something heavy weighed down on him. He wanted to scream but no sound came out. This overwhelming wish of the highest priority prevented Haruaki from thinking about anything else, causing his mind to short circuit. Once the circuits stopped, he could no longer lend voice to his wish, so the thought simply kept spinning in his mind, spinning repeatedly nonstop. Stop, stop, stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop—

He could see Elsie apply more force through her shoulder.

He could also see Kirika fall unconscious, her arm sliding down, the «Tragic Black River» dangling limply without control.

Then... Then—

"Hmm~ It wasn't enough after all, huh... Time's up."

Elsie pulled her arm out from Kirika's body, dyed completely with Kirika's blood. At the same time, while watching in fascination as the blood squirmed and returned into Kirika's body, she said:

"However, with only an ordinary human left, at least I should be able to take care of the Mummy Maker who is no different from a cripple? ...That's what I was thinking originally, but forget it~"

Elsie turned her gaze to the side. Ahead was—

"Guh, ah, huff...!"

Fear was stumbling while unsteadily getting up. Attacked completely unexpectedly, Fear definitely took heavy damage. Breathing with difficulty, she used her drill as a crutch, but her eyes shone with determination as she shakily tried to stand up, her whole body covered with injuries. Judging from the power displayed so far, Elsie probably did not regard Fear as a threat but she said:

"You're more durable than expected. Can't be helped, I'm retreating for today. I'll be back once preparations are done. Before that, you guys just wait patiently—Oh right, say, Elsie-san has no sense of direction. May I ask a question, is this area the busiest part of town?"

Haruaki did not know why she asked this question. Neither was he obliged to answer. Nevertheless—

Haruaki secretly looked down towards the girl in the wheelchair. Expressionless. Despite the appearance of a former comrade who planned to kill her, a former comrade hurting Fear and the others again, Amanda remained completely unresponsive. The girl who had lost her cognition still remained in a state of lost cognition.

—Right now, I'm the only one standing by Amanda's side. Why doesn't the enemy rush over to attack? Why is she concerned about Fear who's all wounded and even going to retreat? Despite being

completely puzzled, Haruaki decided that he had to protect Amanda as best as he could, so he answered honestly, in an effort to avoid reckless lying that might cause the enemy to change her mind.

"I guess... that's correct."

"Yes~ Then as expected, I'll need to do it in this town... Thanks! Seeya next time~"

Completely unconcerned with the wary Haruaki, Elsie turned around and strode away, leaving the park in this manner. Haruaki observed for a while, but there were no signs of her returning.

"Damn... it...!"

"Fear!"

Thud! Haruaki then heard the sound of Fear pushing her hand against the ground, still trying to get up. Fear was panting and holding the flank of her abdomen where Elsie had punched. Haruaki pushed the wheelchair and ran towards her but there was nothing he could do.

He surveyed the park and saw the deformed monkey bars and the broken swing. Thrown into the forest earlier, Kuroe seemed to have sprained an ankle and was hobbling back to the park. Konoha was moaning in pain, clenching her fists on the ground. On the other hand, Kirika had a massive hole in the center of her body, making no sound, she looked like she was dead.

Haruaki could not understand why the enemy had left without delivering the final deathblow.

However, he had no choice but to admit.

Counting from when she first made her move, only a mere two minutes or so had elapsed.

During this duration—

Within these short two minutes—

Hinai Elsie had thoroughly crushed their entire group.

Chapter 3 - The Town Where Large Clocks Cannot Be Read / "Four minutes - for minutes"

Part 1

That night, a visitor arrived at the Yachi residence. Although it was visitor whom Kirika particularly did not want to see, he was impossible to refuse given the circumstances.

Sitting cross-legged on the tatami floor, Himura swept his gaze over everyone.

"...You were defeated?"

"We weren't defeated. That girl ran away."

Fear grumbled while scowling to an unprecedented extent, sipping tea from the table, probably with poultice currently applied to her flank. Although her injuries would heal automatically even if untreated, at least this provided some effect of comfort, offering an impression it would heal faster. The same point applied to Konoha and Kuroe as well. Furthermore, Konoha's arm, which had been pierced by Elsie's fingers, was still bandaged—naturally, Kuroe's hair with life force imbued for treatment was also used.

Only Kirika, who had suffered a fatal attack, looked the same as usual. At this moment, she was narrowing her eyes anxiously and asking:

"Himura, hurry and spit out everything you know."

"Of course, I came with that intent in mind. Although I didn't make it in time for your first contact, it shouldn't be too late if I tell you now. The enemy is Hinai Elsie—one of the Knights mainstays, also known as the «Strongest»... But this only applies under a certain condition. There's probably no more than a handful who can fight her head on, such as those on the level of the Dominion Lord or the Draconian's No.1, the Commander. As for the Lab Chief's Nation, there's only Un Izoey at best, but most likely, even she cannot prevail."

"Indeed, that child can probably be considered the strongest class as a human. But Hinai Elsie is completely beyond human, possessing speed and strength surpassing a human body's limits, even I could not match up to her—Ahhh, how absolutely infuriating! ...Cough, in any case, I don't believe that humans are capable of handling an opponent like her."

Presumably recalling the earlier situation, Konoha feigned calmness but could not disguise her anxiety.

"Hold on, let's forget about the country girl for now."

"Hmm, you said something curious just now. What do you mean by 'under a certain condition'?"

As a matter of courtesy, they had served tea to Himura but he did not touch his drink at all. Fear's question prompted him to nod

.

"This condition is very simple, namely, the duration for which the Wathe in her possession produces an active effect. Conversely speaking—In other words, the Wathe that girl owns, the Shamrock's Experimental Timer «Clockwork Life», has a time limit ."

"Time limit?"

Haruaki repeated those words verbatim. Himura replied in a torrent:

"Due to her strength, she is quite well-known in the business—Hence, I was able to gather a wealth of information regarding her Wathe. Although it's unknown what principles guided «Clockwork Life»'s creation, it seems to be a Wathe that compressed the user's time. One second for us is X seconds for her, where X is greater than one, which is what allows her to move X times faster than us. Her unusual strength and physical durability also stem from the same principle. Suppose X equals two, then during one second for us, the 'her from the 1st second' and the 'her from the 2nd second' are superimposed, resulting in a compressed state of strengthened existence..."

"I am not part of the Lab Chief's Nation, so I have no interest in theories. Absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika interrupted mercilessly, causing Himura to shut up immediately and shrug.

"...Sorry, I wasn't paying attention and..."

"Kirika is right, these complicated theories don't matter. The real question is what means are there to handle her—Since that Wathe has a time limit, that's what we should target, right? Specifically, what is the time limit?"

"Roughly four minutes. That's why people call her the Tiny Extermination Zone—«Four Minutes»."

Haruaki suddenly felt that something was not quite right. Last evening's battle in the park had ended almost within the blink of an eye. Naturally, he had not timed accurately, but based on feeling—

"Last time, it didn't seem like it reached four minutes... I'm not too certain, but it only felt like two minutes."

"In other words, the maximum is four minutes. The ability is activated by winding the watch stem of the pocket watch. Depending on the number of turns, the time limit can be shorter than four minutes, it seems."

Why had Elsie not delivered a final deathblow to them at the time? Haruaki could now understand to some extent—Because the time limit had arrived. Since Fear still exhibited the will to fight, she decided to retreat. However—

"In that case, can't she just turn the watch stem again? But then again, there's no need to be stingy, so why wouldn't she wind up four minutes in the first place?"

"An excellent question, a hundred marks. It seems that « Clockwork Life» can't be used at will—In other words, the watch stem cannot be turned at all times. After all, it's a Wathe with a powerful cursed ability. Hence, I've heard that it needs to first store up something akin to energy in order to activate its power. Considering that the Wathe can only produce four minutes of activation time at most, in other words, it should be alright to say that time must be stored up. That said, it is still unknown how time is stored up specifically."

"I see... Today it happens that she only had enough energy for two minutes. She made her move thinking that it was enough, but it didn't work out in the end, so she escaped."

Konoha murmured in deep thought, then continued:

"In any case, I basically understand. In the end, it looks like the key is how to prevent that pocket watch from activating its power. The effective method is to prevent her from accumulating time—even though it's currently unclear how the act of storing up time is done—prevent her from storing energy. Even if she could activate the cursed power, the shorter the duration, the more advantageous it would be to our side."

"Yes, that girl is completely no threat as long as she's not using the pocket watch's power. Judging from way she looks normally, she seems quite sluggish."

"But how exactly does she store up time? That's the question..."

"Oh, I don't know if it's related or not... But at the end, that girl asked me a question. Something like whether this part of town was the busiest or not? When I told her she was right, she said that as expected, she needed to do something in this town."

"Done in this town... In other words, she might be talking about storing up time while in this town. At least it's better than some other place she might not be able to find. Once we find out what she intends to do, we should be able to stop her, but..."

Kirika lowered her voice in a daunted manner. Similarly, everyone was frowning, daunted.

They had only cleared up what direction the matter should take, but in terms of concrete action, they were still at a total loss.

Honestly speaking, it was quite unsettling.

While they were stuck here worrying, perhaps Elsie was currently storing up time, maybe even accumulating enough energy to use the whole four minutes, then possibly reappearing tomorrow. If that were the case, what were they going to do? Haruaki was unable to help at all. Simply in half an instant, he would be beaten up and neutralized like Fear and the others.

The girls were probably thinking about this matter.

Stopping the enemy from storing any time at all was very likely an impossible task. Since Elsie was able to compress time, were they going to be able to defeat her in the next fight? How much time could they stall for? Everyone was probably pondering this

question, whether Fear who had lost consciousness from merely a single attack, Konoha who was injured, Kuroe who was tossed away like an ordinary doll, or Kirika who had nearly died for real

(Damn it...)

Haruaki quietly clenched his fist on his lap. He gnashed his teeth at his lack of power. As usual, perhaps even more poignant than before, he was unable to do anything.

An intensely gloomy silence occupied the Yachi residence's living room. Everyone looked down while their thoughts were shrouded beneath a dark future as they struggled with internal unease.

Just at this moment, Haruaki suddenly noticed someone squirming beside him, so he looked up.

It was Amanda, still expressionless as usual. Although one could call it squirming, it was actually more like shaking her shoulders slightly. Recently, this started happening on occasion. Amanda was using her body to say something, a signal she sent out with everything she had. Although it was only vaguely in truth, but over the past few days, Haruaki was beginning to understand what she was trying to express.

"You'd like... a drink of water? Here..."

Haruaki picked up a cup of water on the table. Bringing it to her lips, he slowly tilted it. Gulping sounds came from Amanda's

throat, more impatiently than before. It looked like she really was thirsty as suspected.

Haruaki relaxed his expression slightly and looked straight into Amanda's face. She was still alive, alive beyond a doubt. However—Elsie was currently trying to terminate her life.

Despite feeling unsettled, nothing was going to change.

Thinking was imperative, action was imperative. Protecting her life was imperative, she who had ended up this way because of them.

Amanda's visible efforts to live on succeeded in slightly relieving the heavy atmosphere in the living room. As though waiting for the right timing, Himura slowly got up. He had already stood up and started walking by the time Haruaki noticed he was moving. Indeed, his sense of presence was quite weak.

"It's about time for me to take my leave."

As the master of the house, Haruaki felt obliged by etiquette to see him to the door. Fear and the girls also went to see him off. The last to stand up from the tatami floor was the scowling Kirika, as expected.

While putting on his shoes at the entrance, Himura turned his head to glance towards Haruaki's group and said:

"I forgot to ask something important. Although you probably didn't have any spare effort to notice, I'll still try asking. Did she

look like she was carrying the 'mind-healing Wathe' I mentioned before?"

Right, there was that as well. A method that could save Amanda—but at the same time, worryingly, it was a cursed method as well.

"We did not try to confirm. Just as you said, there was no effort to spare either."

"Because in just one hit, you ended up defeated and laid out on the ground."

"W-What are you talking about!? That was... Umm... That was just because I was careless for a moment!"

"Whatever, let's put that aside for now—I wasn't able to confirm at the time either, but I felt like there was something strange about the way she looked. Despite being a member of the Knights Dominion, she was able to converse normally... Neither did she show any of Peavey's brand of insanity involving repeated screams of 'Destroy! Destroy!' But definitely for sure, she's a weird girl."

"I see. Then it could very well be the result of the mind-healing Wathe's power."

Himura nodded in comprehension, stood up and reached for the front door.

"Since the enemy is challenging, asking you to seize the Wathe would probably be an unreasonable request, but I hope you could bear it in mind slightly. Although you are not obliged to do so, please be careful not to break that Wathe with excessively powerful attacks."

"Hmph. Although I can't promise you anything, we'll be more careful."

"Anyway, that's it for now. Okay, next, I intend to devote full effort to investigating that girl's whereabouts and how she 'stores up time.' I will contact you as soon as I have news."

As though it were the most natural thing in the world, Himura explained sincerely what he had to do. Although Kirika had warned against Himura, Haruaki felt that Himura had been taking action responsibly to help Amanda and them. Gathering information carried its own risks—Haruaki felt compelled to say something about that at least. But before Haruaki could express any words of worry or gratitude, Himura had already opened the door and stepped outside. Haruaki really did not notice when he had opened the door.

Himura's sense of presence was as ill-defined as a ghost's just as he was about to vanish into the darkness. Literally, he was about to vanish into the darkness indeed. Presumably, Haruaki was not the only one feeling unsettled by his appearance.

"—Himura."

Kirika called out to him, but she did not continue. Her wavering gaze seemed to be regretting calling to him. She also seemed to be at a loss how to proceed, remaining silent. Himura simply looked back, the corners of his lips curling up slightly.

"Allow me to presumptuously assume you're telling me to take care. I'm not going to force myself too far. Also—I probably won't disappear."

Kirika did not respond. Himura did not say anything more.

Then once again, by the time Haruaki noticed all of a sudden, his figure had already vanished without trace.

Part 2

She was enjoying this delicious dish, that of an obese nobleman. While enduring the pressure coming from all sides, the nobleman emitted screams, threats and pleas that served as incomparably fragrant spices. The pressure, namely herself, did not stop. In order to fully savor the entire dish, the space kept compressing in volume. Crish crish crish, crish crish crish. The space was currently even smaller than a kennel's, stuffed with the obese nobleman. Ahhhhhhhhhhhcrishcrishcrishyahhhhh stop it stop it I beg you, who do you think I am, so sorry please stop it, crishcrishcrish splat . Done. A mass of meat, bones, hair and internal organs. Due to the high quality of the ingredients, this lump of nobleman meat was rich in fat content. Compressed human bodies would give off juices. Viscous, concentrated juices. These juices flowed out from the cracks in her body, red, hot, voluminous, concentrated, sweet and spicy, all at the same time.

Extremely—Delicious.

She was enjoying the music from a mother and her newborn baby. The red-hot brazen bull was bellowing while the cracking of the wood fire was the accompaniment. The crying baby and the crying mother. The stench of charred flesh. Uwah stop it save me I don't wanna die, uwah just this child uwah save him this child this child is dying, uwah uwah uwah. A vocal duet, a song filled with emotion. Moo—The bull was in charge of the interlude. A dance to protect the feet scorched red by heat, accompanied by the rhythm of sizzling freshly roasted meat. The baby's crying vanished. To the protect the feet scorched red by heat, the mother placed the baby underfoot. Hahhh, hahaha, ahahah, let me out let me out let me out let me out, I'm still alive let me out! Echoing in her heart, the postlude's trailing notes were cool and beautiful.

Extremely—Delightful.

She was enjoying the art of a couple. Standing on her, the couple's feet were pierced by the blades and spikes sprouting from her form as an iron board. Holding hands, the pair stood on top. Falling over would lose artistic value, these sculptures of lovers with death lurking by their feet. The castle lord had said: so long as you endure for a day, you shall be released. I love you I love you let us survive and return together, but it hurts my feet hurts I can stand no longer, try your best the pain the pain the pain save

me save me save me! After half a day, the castle lord spoke again: so long as one of you dies, I shall release the other from the board. The man immediately pushed the woman's body down. One of the sculptures fell over, pierced all over by countless blades, resulting in large holes large holes large holes. Yahaha I'm saved I'm saved you stupid woman! As agreed, the castle lord released the man from the board while transforming her to an interrogation chair and saying: Next, you shall sit in this chair. Hearing these words, the man's face turned into a first-rate work of art, carved with despair, how exciting, it felt as though one's heart and soul was cleansed by catharsis.

Extremely—Wonderful.

She was enjoying the drama enacted by a father and daughter. Completely naked, the daughter was bound to the inquisitional wheel. The father's hands were tied. The wheel turned, turned and turned. Under the wheel, a slender bucket was filled with poison that slowly dissolved the body. After the front half of her body was soaked in this poison, the daughter returned after one revolution. To save the daughter, the father extended his tongue, reaching for his daughter's breasts, abdomen, thighs and crotch. A drama where a father licked the poison off his flesh-and-blood daughter's private parts to spit it out. I'll save you lick lick lick spit spit spit lick lick lick, father it's enough gurgle sizzle don't, I'll save you oh not stopping spit spit spit lick lick lick. The daughter's skin was moist with the mixture of the poison and the father's saliva. The father's tongue gradually dissolved from the poison, his saliva mixing with blood. Even so, he stubbornly licked, licking his

beautiful daughter's body, going mad with madness, moaning like a beast while his own crotch swelled in turn. This drama with no ending was immoral, insane, passionate, and evocative of pity all at once.

Extremely—Enjoyable.

Ahhh, this was her life.

She was still living.

Currently... she... very happily...

Living—

"...!"

Fear lifted her blanket and sat up. Before her eyes was her own room, shrouded in the darkness of the night as usual.

Her heart was racing, her head dizzy, she felt nauseous. Covering her mouth with one hand, she used her other hand to tug at her own hair.

"Why... by this point... am I still having... this kind of dream...!"

Of course, no one could answer her whispers.

Then for quite a long while, Fear simply curled herself up, desperately enduring the intense discomfort that seemed to make her entire body shudder nonstop.

Part 3

The next day, in the classroom, it was break time.

"Sigh..." In the neighboring seat, Fear was sighing listlessly. Haruaki cocked his head and asked:

"Are you okay? Why do I feel like you've been low in energy all day?"

"Hmm... No, nothing. It's just that I didn't get any sleep last night."

I guess it can't be helped—Haruaki thought. Indeed, so much happened yesterday. Perhaps her defeat by Elsie hit her so hard that she was unable to sleep.

Whenever Fear became depressed in stark contrast to her usual energetic self, it made Haruaki feel uncomfortable all over. In order to cheer her up, Haruaki suggested:

"I feel sleepy too right now. To drive away the sleepiness, let's go buy some drinks."

"Only if it's your treat."

"You leave me no choice. Understood!"

Haruaki originally intended to invite others along the way but Taizou and Kana were chatting with other classmates while Kirika was not in the classroom. Haruaki and Fear exited the room.

Just as they were walking in the corridor, making their way towards the vending machine near the shoe lockers, Fear suddenly stopped.

"Nuu, Himura."

The teacher with the long bangs was approaching from the opposite end of the corridor. Soon, he seemed to notice them in turn. Himura turned his head to inspect the surroundings before stopping just as they passed by him and whispering:

"...It's you two. Perfect, could you please gather on the roof after school? We'll hold a strategy meeting."

"Eh? Ah... Oh... Is it everyone?"

Since Himura was giving off his usual aura as a gloomy mathematics teacher but suddenly speaking with his original voice, Haruaki could not react in time. Having confirmed there were no other students nearby, Haruaki whispered in return.

"Yes, please tell Kirika and the others for me."

"Since it's a strategy meeting, that means you've come across new information about the enemy?"

"Precisely."

"Ohoh..."

Fear grinned, presumably interpreting the arrival of new information as a chance to counterattack. It also felt like she finally had a chance to vent her stress.

"My, how hardworking you are. Let me praise you a bit."

"That is truly my honor."

Beneath his long bangs, Himura seemed to be smiling wryly. At this moment, several female students passed by Haruaki's group.

"Oh, it's Himura-sensei. Hello~"

"...Hello everyone..."

"Sensei is still the same as always~ You've got to hold your head higher and stick your chest out! That way, you'll definitely look much cooler!"

"Yes... I will try my best..."

"Like I said, you're not doing it right~" The girls giggled while walking towards the other end of the corridor. Despite the gloomy airs he exuded, Himura was quite handsome upon closer examination. Due to this simple reason, he was unexpectedly popular with the female students.

"Yes, you're still a man who can put on a new face rapidly."

"Should this be called putting on a new face...? Anyway, it's already a habit. Originally, people used to tell me that I speak too coldly. In my efforts to speak more politely like a teacher, it became like this."

"Polite like a teacher huh...? That said, you're totally lacking in commanding presence. They won't respect you at all."

"Fear, weren't you arrogantly saying 'let me praise you a bit' just now? You totally have no right to say this..."

"Yes, although that isn't the proper attitude towards the teacher, I believe it does count as love and esteem in a certain way. I don't think there's anything bad about it."

Himura glanced at the direction where the group of girls had left, his shoulder shaking slightly with laughter. Then in an inexplicably self-deprecating voice, he said:

"Especially among the students whom I teach, there are those who hate me utterly, let alone offer love or admiration. How troubling."

Naturally, Haruaki knew who he was talking about and could not help but exchange glances with Fear. Since earlier, he had been very curious about Kirika and Himura's relationship. Fear apparently felt the same.

"Hey, why does Kirika hate you so much?"

"I feel like Kirika will hate me even more if I ended up being the one to explain. Since she hasn't mentioned it, that probably means she doesn't want you to know... Anyway, many things happened in the past. My rights and wrongs. Her rights and wrongs. These were all mixed together complicatedly."

Himura whispered while gazing afar.

"I don't get it but indeed, if Kirika doesn't want to talk about it and we still ask you, it'll cause many problems. Then it doesn't matter. After all, it's not something I need to know no matter what. Just cancel my question from just now."

"A lot happened in the past... Uh... I'm only asking out of curiosity, but how long have you actually known Class Rep, Himura-sensei?"

"If it's just that, I think telling you should be okay. Let me think.. . It was back when she was in middle school. I was still in university at the time but I had already joined the ranks of the Lab Chief's Nation. Then—"

Himura's voice was very gentle as though waxing nostalgic about the past.

Indeed... Haruaki had found it quite unbelievable for some time now. Compared to the masked man he had encountered back when kidnapped by Bivorio, there was something different about him.

He was now very ordinary.

Very ordinarily, using a reminiscing tone of voice with eyes that looked like they were browsing through a nostalgic photo album.

Since he was a member of the Lab Chief's Nation after all, there were indeed areas where he could not be trusted completely. But apart from that, what about the rest?

Himura was putting in full effort for Amanda who was completely unrelated to him. To save her, he was running about sincerely without pretense. To defeat the enemy who sought to kill Amanda, he was gathering all sorts of information—most likely risking his own safety to do so. Whether the fact of investigating a knight of the Dominion or using a cursed mask for these ends, there were surely inherent dangers.

Perhaps like Un Izoey, he was not such a villainous person at heart. Perhaps there were only occasional aberrations due to the standpoint of the Lab Chief Nation's ideology. Haruaki wondered.

"Then the first time I met her was when the Lab Chief brought her to the research facility—"

"Himura!"

There was suddenly a large shout. No sooner had Himura started recounting the past, the end came immediately.

It was Kirika. Probably having gone to the washroom just now, she was now walking towards them in the corridor, glaring

sharply. Then stepping in front of Haruaki and Fear as though shielding them, she glared viciously at Himura.

"...What are you talking to these two about?"

"Nothing much. I was just contacting them to hold a strategy meeting and happened to engage in casual chatter."

Kirika's glare did not relax. Himura shrugged as though surrendering.

"How could you glare at a teacher with these kinds of eyes? It'll be troublesome if someone gets the wrong idea. Yes, in any case, I've said what I needed to. Then see you all later after school on the roof—Oh wait, there's math class during fifth period. Please remember to revise properly. I will be calling on you."

Then Himura turned back into his guise of the gloomy mathematics teacher and left the scene. Without saying a word, Kirika continued to glare at his back until his figure disappeared. Only then did her shoulders heave once from a sigh.

"I can't believe you were standing around, chatting with him. How absolutely ridiculous. Didn't I say to be careful of him?"

"Uh... Umm, sorry. It started with him calling us to tell us about the strategy meeting."

"Yes, then we just went with the flow. We didn't say anything important."

Haruaki and Fear were not lying but still felt guilty. After all, asking about Kirika and Himura's past in Kirika's absence was perhaps a bit underhanded.

"I see... Very well. It's almost time for class, let's head back to the classroom."

Due to standing around chatting, they ended up unable to buy drinks, but that could be done during the next break between periods. Haruaki and Fear followed Kirika while staring at her back. Haruaki thought to himself: at least try asking her directly once. To relieve my unsettled feelings and guilty conscience, asking just once would be fine. He was simply curious and had no intention of getting to the bottom of things. Just an attempt to ask should be enough.

"Umm, Class Rep... It's fine if you don't want to answer, but why do you hate Himura-sensei so much? Umm... Did something happen in the past?"

Kirika halted in her steps. Without looking back, she said:

"Sorry. Umm... To me, it is something that I find repulsive even to recall. So... If possible... I don't want to talk about it. Knowing that, do you still wish to ask no matter what?"

Haruaki's answer was prepared already, of course. Regardless what it was about, he did not want Kirika to suffer. He did not want to hear her speak in such a pained voice again—

"N-No, it's totally fine if you don't want to tell us. After all, it's not like I need to know no matter what. I'm just asking 'why~?' out of simple curiosity—Ooph!"

He ended in a painful grunt, because Fear had elbowed him in the gut.

"Jeez, you're such an insensitive and shameless brat. Everyone has things they don't wanna tell others. Kirika, don't mind him."

Kirika looked back slightly—

"Sorry." Her forced smile was incomparably forlorn.

Hence, after school, Haruaki and friends went to the roof.

Walking beside him, Konoha also seemed a bit off.

"You don't look too well. Are you okay?"

"Eh? Yes... Well, due to taking turns with Kuroe-san to keep watch last night, I didn't get much sleep. But don't worry, I've already replenished my sleep during class."

"That doesn't sound like something you should boast about so openly... Hmm, so both you and Fear didn't get enough sleep. I'm very grateful for you keeping watch during the night, but please don't push yourself too far. If you fall ill, the costs will outweigh the benefits."

"Fufu, I'm not that frail. But in any case, thank you very much."

"Yawn... To be honest, I'm very sleepy too. Are we going to hear some uplifting news next?"

"Who knows. We'll find out when we get there. Amanda, don't move... Here we go."

Fear switched positions with Kirika, who had been pushing the wheelchair, and carried the wheelchair up the stairs. When they reached the roof, Himura was already waiting there.

"You're here."

"We've arrived. If there's any news, hurry on with it."

Fear did not even try to find a place to sit but simply cut straight to the point.

"I'm glad we don't need to beat around the bush. But first of all, I must tell you all that I still haven't been able to find Hinai Elsie's hiding place."

"So there's no way to take the initiative and attack? Then? You couldn't have gathered us all here just to listen to depressing news, right?"

"Of course not. Since we cannot bring the fight to her, as things stand, stopping her from storing up time should be the best countermeasure. Furthermore, while hindering her in this period,

we must also work hard to find her location then defeat her. But concretely, how does she store up time? This question still has no answer."

"Then we're still out of options, so what's the point of this meeting—"

Fear frowned and was getting more and more worked up when Himura extended his hand to stop her.

"Zero marks. You should listen to the teacher until the end. Although the specifics are unknown, I have obtained key hints. But there's no definite proof that it's linked to her."

"Hints... huh?"

"Indeed." Himura nodded at Konoha's question.

"Last night and today, there has been quite a few incidents of clock vandalism. Every clock was quite large and located at conspicuous locations. It's probably not a coincidence that clocks at different places were all damaged."

"Clocks... huh... Considering that she owns a cursed pocket watch, it is quite suspicious indeed."

Haruaki suddenly recalled.

"Speaking of which, wasn't there a large clock at the park? It was also broken."

"Yeah, it was completely by chance that we happened to pass by that park, so Hinai Elsie probably wasn't lying in wait there to ambush us. In that case, due to certain reasons, she made her appearance at that park. Supposing she was there to break the clock, then it all makes sense. Afterwards, playing together with the children—Hmph, probably just on an absolutely ridiculous whim, or could there be some other reason as well...?"

Kirika murmured softly while pondering then looking up slightly to glare at Himura, she asked in a businesslike tone of voice:

"—The quantity and locations of the broken clocks?"

Himura took out a notebook from his breast pocket, reading as he answered. A clock at a downtown shopping mall, a clock on a department store's outer wall, a clock on a comprehensive hospital's outer wall. Confirmed to this date was a total of three... Including the clock stand at the park, there were four.

"Every clock is quite large. If there's some kind of condition, it's probably that."

"Possible. If it only needed to be clocks of any type, attacking a watch shop would probably be the top choice. Have you confirmed this yet?"

"Of course this sort of trivial matter has been confirmed. No watch shop has been broken into or suffered vandalism of merchandise."

"Hmm." Fear crossed her arms and tilted her head.

"Assuming that girl needs to destroy large clocks in order to store time. Then what we need to do next is—"

"Prevent her from breaking more clocks. Since she has already broken quite a few, it means that she probably can't refill that quickly. If that's the case, her fighting time may still be quite short. If we guard a large clock and she shows up to destroy it—Perhaps it'll be to our advantage instead."

"But even if it's just large clocks... There's many of them in town."
"

"That girl probably isn't very familiar with this town's streets, so I think she only targets clocks that she encounters by chance. Assuming she continues to wander randomly in search of large clocks, then the biggest, most visible, most striking one is probably —"

Haruaki desperately searched his memories from the last ten-odd years. As the one who had lived in this city the longest, he quickly found the answer—

"It'll be the one in front of the train station. You see, that's the one embedded in the train station building."

"Oh~ Speaking of which, that one is quite big. The possibility is very high."

"There's too little we can do, so we should try anything that seems remotely likely—Okay, tonight we will keep watch in front of the station!"

Perhaps reviving her spirits due to having a clear target for what should be done now, Fear clenched her fists forcefully and her voice recovered in energy. Then she glanced at Himura.

"Himura, I guess I should say thanks to you. Thanks to your information, we finally have something to guide us."

"—I'm glad to be able to help. But who knows what might happen next. I'll keep gathering information."

Himura spoke in a lively tone of voice then turned to leave as though things were finished. Haruaki originally wanted to thank him but missed the chance. Besides—

Haruaki somehow got the feeling that the figure silently leaving the roof did not want their thanks. Himura simply stared ahead with sincerity and solemnity while making his way forward.

However, even if he did not desire words of thanks, he was probably seeking something else instead. There must be a very pure wish driving Himura to behave in this sincere manner. What exactly could it be?

Fear and the girls were already starting to discuss their planned schedule for tonight. Apart from Haruaki, only two others kept their eyes on Himura until he vanished. The gaze they cast

towards Himura was virtually the same, even though there was the difference between active and passive.

With completely emotionless eyes—Amanda and Kirika watched as Himura departed.

Part 4

The current time was after 7pm. Haruaki's group was at a family restaurant in front of the train station.

Although they had decided to guard the large clock in front of the station, keeping watch exposed to the cold winter air would be too much of an ordeal. Since crowds kept sweeping through until the last train, Elsie was probably going to make her appearance late at night—That was what they predicted but they had no idea when exactly it would be. Besides, Elsie could very well throw something for an instant to break the clock while crowds were still coming through, hence, in the end they decided to use this twenty-four-hour family restaurant as their base of operations while keeping the clock under surveillance. On the surface, they were going to look like troublesome customers who refused to leave until morning, but they hoped the restaurant would not take offense if they ordered more food to compensate.

Luckily, there happened to be an empty table for six by the window overlooking the station. Haruaki, Fear, Konoha, Kuroe, Kirika and Amanda totaled six exactly. To be honest, Haruaki did not want to take Amanda along on this potentially quite exhausting surveillance operation, but since she was Elsie's target, they could not leave her unattended.

The group frequently glanced towards the station while deciding to eat dinner first.

"It's been such a long time since we last went out for food together like this. What should I order...?"

Konoha's gaze simply moved back and forth between the train station and the meat entrees in the menu while she murmured softly. Clearly the pasta and other offering on the following page were not on among her choices from the get go. Suddenly, Haruaki found someone shoving the menu towards him from the side. Naturally, it was not Amanda who was spacing out on his left, but Fear sitting on his right.

"...Choose now."

"Oh thanks. Eh? Why is it the dessert page? Before this, let's eat dinner first."

"W-What does it matter? You can decide now too!"

"True, but my original plan was to just get a coffee after the meal..."

"Nuunuu. No, you don't need to order for real. Just that supposing you were ordering, which would you pick!?"

"Nonsensical!"

Even when Haruaki tried to ignore Fear and turn to another page, she kept holding that page down with a serious expression

for some reason. What was going on? Completely baffled, Haruaki finally looked towards the menu.

"So, if I really had to order, then how about this rice-flour dumplings parfait..."

"Ku... Rejected! Pick another!"

"You're clearly the one who asked me to pick something, yet you reject the choice!? Totally nonsensical!"

"Umm... Since you're picking a dessert after all, I think you should choose something more sweet~ Something more sweet~...! Okay, choose now!"

Fear spoke while staring unnaturally at the menu. Following her gaze, Haruaki found a "Valentine Fair" in a corner with chocolate-type desserts all over it. So she wanted me to choose from there?

"Then... sticking to the basics... I'll choose this common chocolate cake... okay?"

Fear's face brightened up as a result.

"Ohoh! Neither the fontaine chocolat nor the chocolate banana crepe, but this? Really? I see... Haruaki likes to stick to the basic styles. Mufufufu, I feel like I've made progress..."

Halfway through her speech, Fear began to grin eerily to herself. After that, she lost interest in the menu and became lost in her thoughts, muttering to herself. Haruaki cocked his head in

puzzlement but was finally able to turn to other pages and started to choose his main course.

Soon after they ordered, their food was served. Everyone began to eat their respective orders. Of course, Haruaki also ordered menu items that seemed like Amanda could eat conveniently. Naturally, the person responsible for feeding her was Haruaki sitting beside her.

"Open your mouth... Very good, very good, looks like you've got a good appetite."

"Muu~, to have Haruaki-kun feed her personally, that's so enviable... But no, as long as it's Haruaki-kun feeding her, she really does eat obediently."

"If I were the one feeding her, she sometimes refuses to eat. So biased~"

"Damn shameless brat, while we were not looking, you didn't do something to make her stick particularly to you, did you...? Like saying 'this is a massage' while doing shameless things!"

"That's impossible!"

At this moment, eating dinner while paying attention to the station, Kirika threw a glance over.

"Although this is just my opinion as a layman, isn't it a good thing for her tastes and preferences to be getting more well-defined? Just think of it as her emotions getting expressed more and more obviously."

"Perhaps. But externally, there really isn't any visible reaction. Perhaps it's possible that this girl is changing inside, bit by bit."

"Right, although I don't want to recall that event at all, I still must try asking. Back in the park when Hinai Elsie was standing before us, was there any change with Amanda? For example, did she seem particularly afraid or something like that?"

"No... There wasn't any change, but it's possible that I failed to notice it."

"Hmm. As abhorrent the idea may be, her former comrade has turned into an enemy and is out to kill her after all. In this regard, it should serve as unprecedented stimulation... Yeah, but perhaps she simply didn't express it."

While chatting, Haruaki continued to gently insert the spoon into Amanda's slightly opened mouth then withdraw slowly. Amanda gazed ahead with unfocused eyes, chew chew chew, swallow. Then as though saying "more please," she slightly parted her lips.

Humans were unable to live without eating. This was a healthy survival impulse. Haruaki hoped she could maintain her appetite and also hoped that she could express even more appetite. This was precisely the wish of all of them.

Smiling, Haruaki continued to feed Amanda dinner. Just as the plate became almost empty, Amanda closed her mouth to express that she was already full.

"Then, uh... She needs to take her medicine. Class Rep, did you bring it?"

"Yes."

Taking the tablet that Kirika had handed over, Haruaki mixed it with water and had Amanda swallow, thus concluding the meal. Haruaki watched from the corner of his eye as Fear and Kuroe ate a parfait (in the end, he did not order it) while continuing to monitor the station.

"When will she appear...? That said, I've already resolved myself to stay on guard until morning."

"In any case, the restaurant will definitely find us a nuisance, but so long as at least one of us remains awake, they probably won't kick us out. I will stay on watch all night, so feel free to take naps should you feel sleepy, Haruaki-kun or anyone else. I've also brought a small blanket you can use to avoid catching a cold."

"What sleepy and annoying customers we are. I guess I really should order a dessert and contribute a little to the restaurant—Hmm?"

Suddenly, sitting next to Haruaki, Amanda began to shake her body slightly. Haruaki was thinking she might be feeling unwell when unexpectedly, she slowly lowered her upper torso sideways while leaning her back against the sofa's backrest. Finally, her petite head landed on Haruaki's lap with a plop.

She did not look like she was in pain. Amanda simply closed her eyes, greatly satisfied.

"Zzz... zzz..."

Haruaki smiled wryly and could not help but reach out to caress her white hair.

"Feeling sleepy after a full meal? I guess she's the first to fall to sleep. Excuse me, Konoha, if you've got the blanket you mentioned just now—"

Haruaki looked up with surprise. For some reason, everyone was staring at him, their eyes half narrowed, murmuring:

"Using Haruaki-kun's lap as a pillow... That's so enviable..."

"She can't be doing this on purpose right...? Absolutely ridiculous."

"Caressing her head so very naturally. I knew it, you two must have interacted in secret somehow..."

"If I lie down there as well, Haru will probably withdraw his leg silently..."

Part 5

"Ahaha! Stop that, it tickles... Aha!"

Frolicking with the puppy, she laughed happily with dog fur all over her lab coat. She must be reminded later to thoroughly clean away the fur before entering the lab.

Kirika poured the dog food she had brought into a dish. Watching the inedible owner and the edible food, the puppy seemed to be wondering which one to lick, hesitating for quite a while. Finally, he (a male) poked his snout into the dog food on the dish and started to eat heartily. Kirika knelt down in front of him, resting her chin on her hands with her elbows against her knees, watching the puppy with great satisfaction.

What about Himura? Was he happy? Or not happy?

Both. Simultaneously, he was both like and unlike her.

He took a sip from a can of coffee. He only came here because Kirika had invited him to visit the puppy during his break. However, his mind continued to work nonstop.

The research was not going well. Without marked progress, it was simply consuming time and funding continuously. Although inferior to the Lab Chief, Himura was also a young and outstanding researcher, hired with great expectations for his genius talent. Despite being a special research organization, the internal environment was no different from a university's. The higher the expectations one commanded, the greater one's funding ; conversely, those who showed less promise received relatively less funding.

Although Himura really did not care, he was aware that those researchers in the "relatively less" camp seemed to regard a young upstart like him with hostility. Jealousy was truly ugly. Recognized talent received funding, that was all there was to it—However, if results were not produced, then it would no longer be a matter of jealousy but ganging up on the loser.

Himura felt cornered.

Involuntarily, he apparently gave off a sigh. Presumably hearing it, Kirika looked back at him.

"Senpai... Are you feeling troubled?"

"I suppose."

He did not even have the energy to cover up. After he answered honestly, Kirika looked forward again, gently caressing the puppy's head while it was eating. Was she at a loss now?

But then she immediately spoke up:

"Senpai, do you still remember?"

"About?"

"The first time we met... Senpai, you said this."

She turned her head around again, with that certain expression.

Honest, innocent, yet carrying resolute will at the same time—A smile very much in her style.

"You said that 'Impatience is a serious impediment to research.' You weren't lying, right?"

"...Of course."

"Then just take it slowly, step by step. My power is meager, but I'll help... So, umm... Let's do our best together!"

They were the same after all.

Smiling happily, he and she were the same—So long as he was able to see that face of hers, he would be surrounded by that feeling.

How should one put it? This was a feeling that he had never felt before in his entire life—

An unknown sense of happiness.

He wanted to research this unknown forever. Surely, this feeling was going to remain an unknown forever, impossible to

research thoroughly despite a lifetime's efforts. Hence, very well. One rejected social interaction, simply treating research as his only value in living—For someone like him, this was the important nourishment. He wanted to be immersed in this feeling, all the way to the very marrow of his bones, he wanted to experience this unknown of "inexplicable and unbelievable happiness." Forever, till eternity.

He had already had no choice but to admit.

Irrelevant to her identity as a middle schooler, irrelevant to his identity as an adult.

He...

Ever since their very first encounter—

Part 6

In the end, the entire time they were keeping watch from the family restaurant, the train station's clock was not vandalized. Hence, they returned home to prepare for classes before heading to school. Although they had taken brief naps, it was on a family restaurant's couch which was not exactly comfortable. While they were yawning and walking along the way, Kirika's cellphone rang. Although she quickly hung up, judging from her expression, it was probably not good news.

"Who called?"

"That guy. Consider this bad news—I'm told that a large clock at some other place was destroyed."

"What did you say...? Damn it, here I go thinking that the station would be the most conspicuous clock..."

"It's true that it has the highest probability. This simply implies that the enemy happened to target somewhere else."

"But after all, I'm the one who suggested going there... It's still quite depressing. Everyone, I'm sorry."

"Hmph, it's not like we're blaming you. Speaking of which, where was this large clock destroyed?"

Kirika breathed out and looked up after Fear's question.

"Probably what's meant by being so obvious that we overlooked it. Because it's something we take for granted, it ended up hard to imagine. Large clocks are essentially embedded in large buildings, hence, they are present in large buildings distributed throughout the city. In other words—"

Kirika extended her hand. They could already see Taishyuu Private High School ahead of them. She was pointing to the school building's outer wall, the side facing the school gates, welcoming the students' arrival.

"—Namely, the school clock. Destroyed yesterday was a large clock located in a high school east of town."

After school that day...

Immediately after the lunch break, Haruaki's group had made another visit to the superintendent's office together. Zenon, the superintendent, Sovereignty, as well as Kuroe killing time there with Amanda, welcomed their arrival.

After receiving the news this morning, the group's first thought was: there were many clocks in town that Elsie could attack, a surprisingly great number still remained. Hence, after nonstop strategy meetings during the breaks, Fear had said: "I knew it, there's no choice but to ask them for help with this kind of troublesome situation." Hence they had decided to tell the superintendent's side the whole story and request assistance.

They had already explained many things during the lunch visit. Entering the room again, they found the superintendent sitting in his usual chair, raising a hand lightly.

"Hi hi, welcome."

"Yeah. We're so sorry for how sudden it is, but how's the situation?"

"Hohoho, of course it's no problem! ...But actually, the one doing the calculations is Zenon-kun, not me."

"Yes. Please have a look at this map first."

Sovereignty and Zenon took out a large map from the adjacent room then spread it together on the table. Haruaki recalled something similar during the cultural festival, but this time, instead of the school's floor plan, this was a map of the town.

"Considering the average size calculated from the vandalized clocks, I have indicated the locations of clock stands whose sizes are similar to the average. However, I was unable to cover clocks in the internal facilities of places such as factories."

Since making their request during the lunch break, only a couple hours had elapsed. This was too amazing. Haruaki felt deeply impressed while examining the map. Honestly speaking, Haruaki thought to himself, there were probably other areas where Zenon could put her skills to produce great accomplishments instead of working as the superintendent's secretary.

Konoha also looked at the map while exclaiming in admiration.

"I don't think we need to care too much about clocks inside buildings. Compared to places where she has to deliberately avoid security before breaking the clock inside, she would probably choose easier targets which can be seen from the outside."

"But... That said, there's still a lot. Schools, hospitals, department stores... Mumumu."

"So many, this is quite a headache. Even if we split up to keep watch, we're severely lacking in manpower."

"Even if we have enough manpower, it's still completely pointless if our divided combat strength cannot defeat her. Besides , using the clocks she has broken so far, perhaps her pocket watch has already accumulated some energy. What should we do?"

Haruaki and the rest pondered with furrows on their brows, remaining silent for quite a while. Zenon and Sovereignty headed over to the adjacent room first to brew tea but even after they returned, the group still had not come up with a good plan.

However—One person alone was able to break the impasse here.

Assuredly, only someone like her could have thought of such a plan.

Only her arrogant and conceited, for which the concept of prudence was unknown to her.

"...I've got it!"

After a sip of tea, Fear forcefully looked up as though she had realized something.

"You thought of something?"

"Yes! But before that, I must clear up something first. Superintendent, during Christmas, you were hiding a lot of things from us, right? ...Thanks to that, we were left with painful memories. Don't you think you still owe us a favor?"

Saying that, Fear's eyes looked extremely evil as she stared at the superintendent.

"Uh, yes... I suppose you are correct. Regardless whether you're owed a favor or not, if you have anything I could help, please feel free to ask."

"Ohoh, then that's really wonderful. I only tried asking you because what I'm proposing is not simple at all."

Haruaki had an ominous premonition. What exactly did Fear want to say?

"Superintendent, you have many connections, right? Since so much has happened to this date, even I can tell something small like that... Like fabricating an identity for me or exerting some kind of influence over the police, for example. In other words, you're quite an influential person in the entire town, am I right?"

"I suppose."

"On the other hand, Hinai Elsie's goal is to 'destroy large clocks'. .. In other words, we just need to prevent her from breaking clocks. Then the answer is simple. Just think in reverse."

Fear cracked a grin—

Then spoke shocking words.

"We just need to break all the clocks before she gets a chance to do it herself."

"What!?"

"Wait... That's way too reverse in thinking! Get a grip on your unruliness!"

"But I think this will work quite well. Besides, although I say break, it's not like we need to break the clocks physically like our enemy. Just pluck the hands off the clock temporarily."

Fear spoke calmly with confidence. Indeed, her plan might work. A clock with its hands removed would definitely not be considered a clock anymore. It was very likely that Elsie would not target something like that to destroy. However—

"Doesn't this cause other people a great deal of inconvenience...?"

"It's just a small sacrifice to accomplish something big. We are shouldering human lives here."

Fear looked at Amanda sitting on the wheelchair. Everyone in the room also focused their gaze on her. For what purpose were they taking action? What is their primary objective and what should they prioritize the most?

They remembered.

"Don't worry. It's not like we're stopping the clocks forever. It's just a few days. Before that, I also have a plan."

Immediately, Fear explained her plan to everyone. Theoretically speaking, this plan seemed like it could be executed correctly. Haruaki and friends looked at one another.

"...What does everyone think?"

"Assuming this plan is feasible—I will support Fear-kun's idea. After all, we have no other solutions. It's at least much better than waiting for the enemy to finish storing time, then reappearing before us."

"I agree too~ The problem is..."

The superintendent shrugged helplessly while sighing noises came from under his gas mask.

"So that's why you first asked to check if I still owed you a favor ... How troubling. Indeed, this is no simple task. First putting aside the places where I hold leverage over, but considering places where I simply have friendly relations, I'll need to compensate them accordingly—Yes, putting it delicately, I'll need to donate a little something. These will end up being horrendously expensive."

Next, the superintendent got up without hurry and walked over to the table where Haruaki's group was gathered. However, he finally stopped in front of Zenon and Sovereignty then patted their shoulders with his hands.

"Please allow me to ask you two a question. What's the lowest salary you can tolerate if I make a cut?"

"E-Eh? Oh oh—Y-You're the one who hired me after all, I'm very grateful simply for the fact that you're willing to hire me! But what will Shiraho say...? Umm... Awawa, am I actually facing a life and death crisis?"

Sovereignty instantly went into panic. On the other hand, Zenon's expression remained calm as usual.

"It seems like this hasn't made an appearance for quite some time... My answer is this."

Swiftly, she reached for her breast pocket, intending to take out the letter entitled "Resignation." Oh no, it'd be too tragic if even you get affected negatively, Zenon-san, so let's reconsider! Haruaki was just about to speak up in a panic to dissuade her when—

"...But in my personal opinion, so long as the superintendent liquidates a couple of his personally owned real estate, isn't it a win-win situation for all of us?"

"Well said. I was just joking. Oh my, honestly."

The superintendent shrugged again and peered forward at the map on the table. Taking out a ballpoint pen from his pocket, he examined the map for a good while before circling a number of locations.

"Plus here... These are the ones. Even someone like me cannot possibly control everywhere in town. The circled locations are the

places where I don't have special connections and will find it difficult to exert influence. Apart from those, leave the rest for me to find a way to handle."

"Superintendent... Is this really okay?"

Haruaki stared at him in surprise. The superintendent laughed and said:

"Back to what Fear brought up just now, I do owe you guys a favor after all. I made quite a bit of money in anticipation of encountering something like this eventually, so what would normally be considered a massive expenditure, to me, it's only a trivial affair. If you still feel guilty about it... Hmm, just pretend that I'm lending the sum to you all. Pay me back when you get rich and successful in the future."

Haruaki did not want to ask specifically how much it would cost, but as one would expect, this was an unimaginably astronomical sum for them. "Hi there, hello, excuse me, may I trouble you to temporarily remove the hands from the clock in your building?"—Haruaki did not think that such a strange request could be settled by convincing the other party with merely ten or twenty thousand yen in donations.

Haruaki and friends looked at one another. They were really causing great trouble for the superintendent's side. And this time, it involved something tangible like money. It was difficult to accept in the first place, but...

No matter how they racked their brains, apart from this, there was no other method to protect Amanda.

"Seriously, absolutely no one would bring up this kind of request if they had a shred of common sense or general courtesy... Fear-san, please thank them properly from the bottom of your heart!"

"Hmm? Oh, that'll really be a great help. Thanks. Slurp~"

"So casual! And you said it while drinking tea, that's so rude! Fear-san!?"

"Hmm~ Looks like it's finally time for a dream-like service to debut. I have no choice but to issue the «Dan-no-ura's Forever Free-of-Charge Coupon, No Matter What Service my body excluded»...!"

While Fear and the others were saying strange things including thanks that did not count as thanks, Kirika was the only one who politely bowed her head and expressed gratitude seriously: "I am truly thankful to you all." Haruaki followed suit:

"H-Honestly... I feel very embarrassed, but also thank you very much...!"

"It's nothing, don't let it weigh on your mind. Speaking of which, what do you guys intend to do about the places outside my reach?"

Putting aside the matter of thanking the superintendent, Haruaki's group looked at the map on the table. Asked what they ought to do...

"...Then we'll just have to travel there physically and break the clock, right? It's not too late to start now."

"In other words, we are turning ourselves into a terrorist group from hell, yes? Sneakily taking part in vandalism... Fufufu, I'm so eager to start. I will kill everyone in my way~"

"Hey, Kuroe, stop saying such ghastly things."

"After all, with Amanda-kun, it's better for you guys to act as a group. As for other places, if it's just about breaking clocks discreetly—"

"Allow me to help. Just as Kuroe-sama said... 'Fufufu, I'm so eager to start. I will kill everyone in my way.' Something like that."

Zenon took out a throwing knife from somewhere and raised it in front of her, causing the knife's blade to glint and flash. Having been through the Christmas incident, Haruaki's group were quite well aware of her excellent knife-throwing skills. However—

The superintendent spoke in an inexplicably stiff voice:

"Uh, umm... You must be joking, right? But said so seriously, you really don't sound like you're joking."

"Is that so?" Zenon murmured, still serious as usual, before replacing the throwing knife into the inside pocket of her suit.

Part 7

"Uumu~ So this kind of place actually exists. There are still places in town that I don't know about..."

Despite speaking in a calm tone of voice, Fear was looking up at the signboard with a very excited expression.

On it was written—"Woof Meow Friendship Park."

After ending the strategy meeting at the superintendent's office, Haruaki's group went to a place with a large clock, namely, this location. This was a facility located in the suburbs, a park where visitors could come into contact with many kittens and puppies. It could also be considered a way to address house pets' lack of exercise since the park allowed people to bring in their own cats and dogs from outside.

Although it was currently dusk and probably close to closing time, the park still contained many people. In the central region of the park, there was a wide open garden carpeted with grass with a large clock stand in the corner. After confirming the location, Fear spoke up, still clearly distracted:

"As much as I'd like to break the clock as quickly as possible, other people are still around. It'd be bad if someone saw us."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Also, this place is far. That's only expected, because we decided in our discussion to start with the farthest places first, after all."

"Yeah, we'll need to take a taxi for the return trip."

"In other words, simply breaking this clock here is our limit for today. So logically speaking, I think we should wait until the nearby crowd thins out! So, what should we do while we're waiting? Of course, there's no choice but to consider the current location, plus to bring stimulation to Amanda as well, so we should emulate the animal-assisted therapy shown on television—"

"Yeah, come on, I get it, okay? You may go play for a while. But don't cause trouble for others and be careful not to get Amanda hurt."

"Yahoo~! Amanda, let's go, the furry animals are waiting for us!"

Fear swiftly pushed the wheelchair and rushed towards a puppy in the garden. "May I pet it?" After obtaining permission from the owner, a woman, Fear excitedly petted the puppy's head then spun around the wheelchair, sometimes chasing the puppy's tail, sometimes being chased by the puppy.

"Seriously, she's totally like a child..."

"Okay okay, perhaps animal-assisted therapy really might work . Besides, Ficchi's mood hasn't been great lately, but she looks like she's having fun right now. It's good to relax once in a while."

Saying that, Kuroe took out a camera from somewhere at the same time and kept snapping photos of Fear and Amanda. Then she turned her gaze and said:

"...In this regard, Kono-san, you seem a little down lately. I will be in charge of photos while you go and have some fun, Kono-san. Oh, a puppy just happened to come over."

Kuroe was right, a large golden retriever was approaching them , its tongue out and panting. It looked like it was a dog kept by the park. Konoha scratched her cheek.

"I'm not feeling particularly down... However, since you're here already, hello doggy."

Konoha knelt down and caressed the dog with a little hesitation . Of course, Konoha did not dislike dogs either. Due to the Yachi home taking in a stray dog once, they knew quite well. After stroking the dog, Konoha's mood seemed to improve as she read out the name on the collar and started speaking in mysterious dog language.

"Uh... What's your name? Oh it's John... What a good name, woof."

Had Fear been present, surely she would have mocked Konoha mercilessly as though having picked up something worthy of blackmail. Nevertheless, while speaking with the dog, Konoha's body began to lean back for some reason.

"Ah... Excuse me... John, you're getting a bit too close... Umm... Ah... You're also licking too hard... Kyaah?"

The dog placed its front paws on Konoha's shoulders, pushing down on her with his whole body. Perhaps reluctant to shove the dog away, Konoha fell and sat on the ground as though pushed down by John. She was tilting back completely with John weighing down on her body. The dog kept licking various parts of her body. Konoha's legs struggled helplessly beneath her skirt while she screamed in an acute voice:

"Kyah... Ah... No... Don't lick there... Kyah?"

"Muha, This shutter chance is really unexpectedly good!"

"Hey Kuroe-san, please stop taking photos and hurry to save me—!"

Probably due to hearing Konoha say the word "lick," Haruaki could not help but recall the delusion he had experienced previously, instantly making him feel uncomfortable. However, he had to rescue her first—Just as Haruaki tried to approach Konoha from the back (going from the direction of her legs would be too embarrassing), a member of the staff noticed the commotion.



"Hey John, stop it! I'm sorry, he's usually much more obedient..."

"Muu, I can see it. This is surely because he was attracted by the aroma of meat exuded from Kono-san's body. As expected of Kono-san, the incarnation of lust in various ways!"

"N-No matter how much of a hyperbole, I haven't eaten meat to the point that my body smells like meat, okay!?"

Thanks to the staff's rescue, Konoha was finally freed from John's oppression. Panting, she readjusted her clothes.

"Muu, what the heck, looks like Cow Tits is having fun too."

Returning unnoticed, Fear commented with her head cocked in puzzlement.

"You've had enough fun on your end?"

"Since there's so many different breeds of dogs here, there's no point playing with a single dog the entire time after all. By the way—Hmm, excellent. This place is great."

Guiding Amanda's wheelchair, Fear surveyed the vast area of the park with her back straight. With the scene illuminated by the setting sun, even Fear's silver hair was dyed with a shade of red, shining with dream-like luster.

"Sure enough, this world still has many places I've never experienced..."

She murmured with heartfelt emotion.

Throughout the long years, Fear had remained dormant in solitude and darkness. While sleeping, she endured her own sins.

Coming from someone like her, these words surely carried special significance.

Hence, Haruaki smiled.

"...Just this town alone, there's plenty of places you've never visited. If you expand the range to cover the entire world, there will be too many to count."

"Yes. So you should at least tell me all the interesting sights in this town without missing any. If it wasn't for this pressing need, I wouldn't even have known about this Woof Meow Friendship Park for a long time! That's completely unacceptable!"

"Yes yes. Hmm, when the time is right, I guess."

Next, Fear's interest seemed to be caught by the cat petting house visible in the distance.

"Not only puppies but kittens as well! Haha, this place is truly perfect. I'm gonna have a quick look... Kirika, are you coming?"

"Hmm? Oh... Sure."

Kirika had been spacing out while watching the park area, her eyes not focusing on anything in particular. Only now did

Haruaki notice she did not look quite well so he whispered in her ear:

"Oh... Umm, Class Rep, perhaps you're a little afraid of playing with animals? If that's the case, you don't have to force yourself to go along with Fear."

"It's not like I hate them, however..."

Kirika smiled faintly and answered.

At the same time, she made an expression of extreme forlorn.

"However—I was simply recalling memories from the past."

Part 8

She received a phone call from the one she loved and revered.

'How is the current situation'

"...Yes! Uh... Umm... Although the mission is not accomplished yet—However, there's no problem at all! *NOTHING* indeed! In all sorts of ways, it's just a matter of time!"

'Very well. You know what you must do, yes?'

That person was talking to her, *he* who stood as her absolute ruler.

In a daze of ecstasy, she clutched her cellphone tightly.

"—That goes without saying. My hand is your sword; my legs, your horse; my body, your shield. As your possession, acting according to your will, that is who we are—Knights."

Indeed.

Becoming his sword to chop up enemies.

Becoming his horse to trample corpses.

Becoming his shield to block attacks.

That was not all. She was going to offer everything, everything, everything in sacrifice to *him*. Becoming his hand to clutch scalding stones, becoming his tongue to sip poisonous fluids, becoming his ears to listen to resentment, becoming his nose to smell the surrounding stench of blood, becoming his mouth to confess sins, becoming his sexual organ to bring him pleasure, becoming his heart to sustain life.

This was herself, the existence named Hinai Elsie.

'—I look forward to your performance, Hinai Elsie.'

Through the phone, he finally said this as though murmuring.

This sentence alone was enough to bring her to climax.

"Y-Yes... S-Such words coming from you, fills your humble servant with awe. Absolutely, your humble servant will accomplish the mission—*My lord*."

Part 9

After the superintendent's side pledged their support, they now had a direction for what they needed to do, hence exhausting themselves by spending nights at family restaurants would be putting the cart before the horse. Consequently, they went back home to the Yachi residence last night to rest as normal.

Another night passed and the next day, Haruaki's group continued to take Amanda to school. Bringing her to the superintendent's office in the morning, they learnt that no clocks were vandalized the previous night (apart from the ones Haruaki and Zenon destroyed, of course)—And relying on the superintendent's influence, the clocks elsewhere were going to have their hands removed by the end of today's daylight hours at the latest. As for the few remaining clocks in other places where his influence did not extend, Zenon was going to make a circuit in town to destroy them while school was in progress.

In other words, by the time school ended, this town was going to become virtually free of functional, large clocks—With that, they would finally be able to carry out the final phase of their plan.

Once the sun had completely set, after the time for students to return home had long passed, Haruaki's group made their appearance in front of the deserted school gates. They were still basically dressed in uniform but what they carried were not schoolbags filled with studying materials but bags and rucksacks they had gone home to pick up.

Fear looked up at the dark sky shrouding the school building at night, grinning malevolently.

"Hmph hmph... The students of this school are so lucky. Had it been some other school, a lot of students probably were late today."

"Rushing as fast as they could after entering their school, it must have been very tough. This is really creating trouble for everyone."

"Although there's no choice... But it does make me feel guilty. Like the big clock at the station, apparently some bigshot was asked to stop it for us. Who knows how many people were inconvenienced by that."

Kuroe and Kirika looked up at the same object. Apart from Amanda, everyone's gazes were directed towards the large clock of Taishyuu High School before them.

Only the clock here was neither destroyed nor had its hands removed. Whether or not anyone was looking at it, the clock continued to measure the passage of time, step by step.

Of course, this was intentional and precisely part of their plan.

At this moment, a figure appeared behind the school gates.

"Good evening, everyone, I shall open the gates for you now."

"Oh hello. Thank you for your trouble."

Zenon operated the gates from inside, causing them to open slowly with a grating sound. After Haruaki's group successfully sneaked into school under the cover of night through the opening gap, Zenon closed the gates again.

"Then allow me to take you to the night watchman's room. The security system is already disabled, so don't worry."

"Thank you... But does this school actually have a night watchman's room?"

Haruaki's question prompted Zenon's answer:

"Since security is completely computerized, the room is normally unused. A relic dating back to the days before technology, I suppose. I have already cleaned it up for the most part, but should there be any inadequacies, I apologize beforehand."

"Of course not, just the fact that you're providing us with a place to rest, that's already enough. After all, we originally planned to hide in a bush somewhere to wait for that girl to appear! So don't worry!"

Fear puffed out her chest proudly while answering.

In other words, this was precisely the result of the plan Fear had suggested, the last remaining large clock in this town. Since time must be stored up in order to fight, Elsie would very likely appear here to destroy this school's clock. Then all they needed to do was wait on scene to challenge her—The plan was exceedingly simple.

"But will she really come?"

"After all, she asked Haruaki specifically before saying she'd carry it out in this town. In that case, she very likely has some sort of reason why she must collect time in this town. So long as there's no other choice, she must appear eventually... I'm sure she should have at least investigated beforehand to know that we go to this school, besides, the school has a clock too. If she suddenly couldn't find any moving clocks, it's not surprising if she came to check out this place first, one that she knows. Although it might not be today, don't be impatient, let's wait for two or three more days."

"It might be a bit late to ask by this point, but won't she notice it's a trap?"

"Hmm... She probably would find it suspicious to some extent. But she probably doesn't know that all the clocks in this town have been disabled. That's not something she could know unless she checked out every place with a clock. After seeing several stopped clocks in town by chance, perhaps she might associate it with us taking action, but it shouldn't be enough for her to deduce that the clock here is the only one left. There's not enough information available for her to confirm this is a trap. And for her, storing up time is the most important... In other words, even if she does get slightly suspicious in the end, it won't be enough reason to make her give up on this clock. 'I finally find a moving clock!' This reaction should probably make her appear openly, the way ants act after discovering sugar."

Then once they caught her, everything after that would be simple. With the assistance of the superintendent's side, she was

probably prevented from storing time as planned and right now, Haruaki's group also knew that her fighting duration had a limit. If she only managed to store up a bit of time, there should be no problem as long as they took care to prevent her from escaping, then pursue a strategy focusing on stalling for time without pushing themselves too far to fight her...

(That's right, there should be... no problem.)

Haruaki looked at the clock above again and gulped. In terms of combat, there was not much he could help. If even someone like him was starting to feel nervous, surely, the girls must be even more—Just as he thought that, Zenon said:

"Well then, please come this way. It would be troublesome if nearby residents called the police, so please use flashlights when walking in the corridors. Of course, should necessities arise during actual combat, there's no need to take so many considerations. Also, the night watchman's room does not leak much light even if you switch the light on, so don't worry."

"Yes, after all, there's a bright moon tonight, so there's no problem at all. By the way—Ohoh, we finally get a chance to sneak into school at night! How exciting!"

"How should I describe this immoral feeling...? Despite being so lively during the daytime, the school building is totally silent now.. . It's totally like the way a prim and classy lady turns into a wanton slut as soon as night arrives! It makes my entire body excited!"

"What incomprehensible nonsense are you speaking again, Kuroe-san... Please do not cause a great commotion. If the nearby residents really were to call the police, it would be terrible. After so much effort spent to draw out that girl, she could very well discover it's a trap. But yes, I do admit that I do find myself feeling a little excited."

"To be honest, I find it quite a new experience too. It's like being in an unfamiliar place for the first time."

Under Zenon's lead, Fear and the others walked into the school building at night. Yes, getting nervous now would not help things at all. Sighing, Haruaki followed after them.

The night watchman's room was located on the first floor of the staff block. They were confronted with the musty smell of a seldom-used room, but it was not to the point of intolerable. Roughly six tatamis in size, the room was a little cramped to squeeze six people inside. Facilities included a kitchen counter and gas stove, so cooking instant noodles for a midnight snack should not be a problem.

"Hmm hmm... This isn't bad. Although it's a little cramped, I like the fact that it's carpeted with tatami."

"The closet there has blankets. They're already washed as well."

"By the way, what about baths and going to the toilet? There's no bathroom here."

"My apologies. For toilets, please use the staff washroom which is on the right after exiting this room. Of course, there's no bathroom—But if you don't mind, feel free to use the showers in the clubs block. Here is the key."

Zenon handed a very fancy-looking key holder (probably Zenon's personal preference) to Fear then took a deep bow, preparing to leave the watchman's room. Haruaki frantically spoke up:

"Umm... Thank you! I'm so sorry for causing so much trouble for you..."

"Please don't let it weigh on your mind. Well then, I shall remain on stand by at the superintendent's office. Please feel free to come find me if there's anything. Although a situation may not arise today, I'll say this last just in case—May victory smile upon you."

Hence, Zenon left the watchman's room. Haruaki then noticed Konoha staring at Zenon as she left and closed the door.

It looked like Konoha had thought of something after listening to Zenon.

It looked like it was something she was compelled to recall.

Her eyes showed determination.

"May victory smile upon us...? It's been quite a long time since I last heard this phrase. No matter—Indeed, that is the current situation. A saying that suits the situation..."

Murmuring to herself, Konoha closed her eyes. By the time she reopened them, she was back to her usual self.

"Well then, our first priority is—Hey Fear-san, don't put out the bedding so soon! And you're even putting it in the very center!"

Fear was patting the bedding especially happily while adjusting its position then looked up with a delighted expression.

"What does it matter? It needs to be put out sooner or later anyway! But after setting out the bedding... Why does it feel so... Yes, I got it! This is what they call a training camp!"

"Yes, this is like a mini training camp, so feeling excited or happy is only natural. Let my lay out some bedding too~ No, the bedding can wait, but I must snatch a pillow first."

"Kuroe-san... So long as I haven't taken my last breath, I absolutely forbid you from starting a pillow fight."

"I'm caught!"

A training camp huh... Haruaki thought. In the same room, with the pillows lined up in a row, perhaps this really could be called a training camp... That said, no one would probably hold a training

camp in the night watchman's room at school and instead of having pillow fights or having dirty conversations in the room, they are currently waiting for an enemy who may show up.

They had planned to spend the next two or three nights here while discreetly sneaking out to attend classes during the day, having brought a couple day's worth of clothing to change. Since Zenon was so kind as to lend them a key, added to the fact that they were going to live here for a couple consecutive days, they decided to take a shower now because there was no other opportunity (once dawn arrived, the students doing morning training would be using the showers). That said, since Elsie could arrive any time, they took turns in showering, of course. The first round was Amanda, who was already falling asleep, along with Fear and Kuroe who were always helping her bathe.

Kuroe searched her luggage.

"Well then, I must prepare~"

"You even packed a shower cap!? Despite the fact that we didn't know if baths were available at the time."

"Fufu, we are the 'Help Amanda-chan Bathe Comfortably Team', abbreviated as the 'Slick and Smooth Trio.' How could I possibly omit this sort of preparations?"

"That's totally not an abbreviation!"

"As to what's slick and smooth, obviously it's—"

Kuroe proudly turned towards Haruaki but just as she was about to continue explaining, a frightening figure suddenly appeared behind her and tapped Kuroe on the shoulder.

"...Rather than spouting indecent nonsense, why don't you get ready and shower faster, Kuroe-san."

"Th-That's right! But of course, I-I mean that our skin is smooth and delicate! Amanda-chan's body has some tragic burn scars but the other spots are really smooth and delicate!"

"Hmm... Given modern medical technology, those scars might be possible to remove via surgery. I wonder what happened in the past? Perhaps it might be related to how she joined the Knights Dominion... In any case, it's heart wrenching."

Konoha narrowed her eyes and murmured softly.

"Uumu, so I was thinking, this girl probably never took baths with others before. But we don't mind at all and sincerely help her wash her body, trying hard to teach her the joys of taking baths with others. Period."

"Hmm... I guess I'm a little late here, but Kuroe, thank you for your hard work."

"Understood. Oh, since Haru cannot come in with us, I should report to you. Feel free to imagine as much as you want. Ever time we wash Amanda-chan's sensitive spots, she always reacts by trembling. While I use my hair to make her put on a cheering pose, then together with Ficchi, we use the entirety of our smooth and

delicate bodies, doing this and that from the front or from the back —"

Instantly, the scene surfaced in Haruaki's mind. He could not help but imagine according to Kuroe's descriptions. Taking place in that familiar bathroom, an unfamiliar feast of bare skin. Surely, Kuroe must be using her professional hair washing skills to wash Amanda's hair while Fear undoubtedly stared relentlessly at a certain part of Amanda's body, then nodding in approval, a sense of camaraderie was produced—No no no, stop. Haruaki frantically shook his head.

"..."

At this moment, he noticed Konoha was right in front of him at close range, her half-narrowed eyes meeting with his gaze.

"Haruaki-kun~" I was calling your name a couple times just now... I even asked you not to go imagining strange things. Why were you spacing out until just now?"

"Ugh! No, umm... Uhh..."

"You... imagined it? Desperately imagining so hard that you even failed to hear me calling your name? Ufufu... It's okay, just admit it honestly and I won't be angry. Hurry up and confess."

"Uh... I-I guess I have no choice but to admit it, given the current situation, I must apologize. But, umm... I didn't do it on my own initiative, rather, it's my imagination running out of control on its own! B-Because so much happened recently, my

mind is so exhausted, sometimes I start spacing out suddenly, so because of that—"

At this moment, Fear's and Kirika's shoulders suddenly shook for some reason. Then they each turned to a different direction and coughed lightly.

"Cough... O-Okay, Cow Tits, don't be so hard on him. No matter who, everyone~ occasionally has strange delusions. Yes, no matter who."

"Y-Yes, legally speaking, it's not like even mental thoughts must be censored. Yachi is right, this does happen occasionally when one is too exhausted."

For some reason, Fear and Kirika defended him unexpectedly. Haruaki felt extremely grateful.

Hearing Fear and Kirika's objections, Konoha sighed in surprised.

"Sigh, indeed... Nonsensical thoughts do occur when one is too mentally exhausted. After all, we're nursing someone, something we're not used to, and even suffered defeat in a moment of carelessness. Spacing out and having strange delusions aside, I also find myself somewhat tired mentally. Like sleeping poorly or having nightmares, it's been happening quite often recently."

"Nightmares huh... Hmm, on this point... It's not like I can't relate."

Fear mumbled without looking at Konoha. Konoha calmly looked at her and said:

"You too?"

"Nothing much, just the kind of content you forget as soon as you wake up."

In contrast to what she was saying, Haruaki felt that Fear's voice carried quite a depressing presence. However, Fear quickly began to search through her luggage again. Presumably intentionally, she spoke nonchalantly:

"Hmm—To think I had nightmares just like Cow Tits, that's quite a disgusting coincidence. Simply based on the result, it means we're all equally tired. The shameless brat spacing out, Kirika, Kuroe, we're all exhausted. But we're at the last step, once the enemy is defeated, we can relax and lower our guard. I'm starting to get used to taking care of Amanda, so once this plan succeeds, life will be a lot easier here on."

"...Yes. In any case, the most important thing currently is that this plan succeeds."

Konoha shrugged and spoke quietly. Kuroe nodded hastily.

"Agreed, since we're this tired, I guess I really must offer to Ficchi my healing hair washing technique while we're in the shower this time. I will use my pleasuring techniques of ecstasy to send you to heaven!"

"There may be a huge battle coming up next, so sending her to heaven really isn't an option. In any case, please hurry and ready your preparations for showering. Don't just bring your own but include Amanda-san's as well!"

"Yes yes~"

After getting her own clothes ready, Kuroe started preparing a change of clothes for Amanda. Fear went back to her usual self and continued rummaging through her luggage with her head cocked.

"Hmm~? I remember packing underwear... Oh, found it."

"Hey, don't just spread it out like that!"

"Amanda-chan is this one and this one... Right, who bought this underwear for her, I wonder... Could it be the teacher, holding such a sanctified position, carefully selecting with a serious face in the underwear corner of a store...?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, it was me. When he first brought her to my home, that guy asked me to buy all the clothing that Amanda would need. However, Kuroe-kun, your thinking is very correct. I hope you'll continue to maintain this level of wariness regarding him. That's the kind of man he is, worthy of public revulsion."

"Yay~ You're praising me~!"

At this moment, Kirika's cellphone suddenly rang. Recently, it had become possible to guess the caller simply by observing

Kirika's face as she checked the screen. In other words, the caller this time happened to be Himura who was just mentioned.

When first starting to execute Fear's clock vandalizing plan, there were a number of chances to speak with Himura, hence they had already informed him of their operation and goal. Himura had expressed praise and admiration at the time and offered his approval. However, due to having duties only he was able to carry out, Himura left the clock matter for Haruaki's group to handle while he continued to search for Elsie.

Unfortunately, Himura still had not made any obvious progress on his side. By now that things had progressed to this point, he had apparently decided to participate in the battle plan.

"...Do as you wish. However, there's no place here for you to sleep."

Kirika coldly ended the conversation then moved the cellphone from her ear and looked towards Haruaki and the others.

"This guy is coming to school too. Apparently, he will be concealing himself in the bushes somewhere, waiting for the enemy attack."

"In terms of helping, that really does help, but will he be okay by himself? After all, it's nighttime currently and it must be freezing outside."

"Even so, I have no wish of inviting him here. Don't be concerned, that guy is very used to voyeurism. It's absolutely ridiculous, but it's basically like work to him."

Her tone of voice made it sound like Himura was an expert voyeur. Judging from the tool he possessed, this was perhaps only natural. At this moment, Haruaki noticed that Kirika was still holding her cellphone without closing it. Just as he tilted his head in puzzlement, Kirika explained:

"—This? I haven't hung up. I asked him to stay on the line for now."

"Eh, why?"

Kirika gave the answer matter-of-factly.

"Didn't I just say that he's very used to voyeurism? Fear and the others are going to shower next, so I can't having this guy running around loose. Once he goes to the showers, I'll hear water sounds from the other side, so this serves as a kind of restraint."

...Distrusted to this extent as a man—Haruaki could not help but sympathize with Himura a little.

Part 10

While patrolling, Konoha halted and looked up at the school building's large clock overhead. The time was fast approaching midnight.

Her current location was the open space between the school gates and the school building, calling it the front yard would not be wrong. This was a broad and spacious path leading from the gates to the school building where countless students passed by and interacted with one another every morning. Left and right of the path were bushes, lawns and a few trees. The moon, clear and bright, was illuminating these things faintly.

Although no presence could be felt, Himura was probably somewhere, looking up at this clock. Konoha did not know if he had used the cursed mask that could eliminate all sense of presence or if he concealed his presence on his own. Either way, Konoha was quite impressed that he was able to prevent her from sensing his presence.

Konoha looked at the hands as they traced the passage of time, shaking her head lightly. Now was the time for thinking about the enemy, not Himura. Then she found herself confronted with an exceedingly simple question.

In other words—Was she able to defeat her?

Konoha recalled the scene at the park. Overwhelmed in both strength and speed, she had collapsed in such an unsightly manner.

Unlike last time, the "time" accumulated by Elsie should not be that much, so there should be a solution. By focusing on defense completely to stall for time, there should be a way. There should be a way. There should be a way—

—*Honestly?*

"...!"

Konoha could not answer this question, rising from the depths of her heart.

She bit her lip. Admit it. Hinai Elsie was very strong. Perhaps she very well could be the "strongest" indeed.

However, Konoha could not allow herself to conclude the matter simply with "we can't win."

Elsie was going to take away everything. Whether the life of Konoha, the girl from the Knights Dominion, the cube of torture and execution, or—

No, no, no.

This was one point she could not accept. Even if it meant making the entire world her enemy, this point alone could not be conceded at all.

She shifted her gaze that had settled on the clock. The faint moon leapt into view as a result.

The unreal glow was unbelievably causing her consciousness to grow hazy.

Lately, she had been frequently having dreams. Ever since losing to Hinai Elsie on that day, Konoha had been having extremely unpleasant dreams. As mentioned earlier, perhaps

simple fatigue was related—However, Konoha believed that it was also linked to the memory of defeat.

Guided by the moonlight, Konoha slipped into her ambiguous consciousness as that dream surfaced before her eyes.

The dream was harshly reprimanding her.

Why did you lose? You know very well. Because you are not your quintessential self, your strength is lacking. Because you refuse to admit, you lost. Recall once again. Even if you pretend to have forgotten, you absolutely cannot have forgotten. Muramasa, Muramasa, Muramasa. The demon blade, thirsting for and drinking fresh blood. Recall it, recall it, hurry up and recall it—

In actual fact, she had been lying all along.

(This is a necessary... lie.)

As though trying to escape the moon's mystical powers, Konoha closed her eyes and clenched her fists tight.

However—If... If necessary—

If in order to protect him, she had to admit that point no matter what—

"Wow, it's really quite cold outside. Uh, Konoha, is it really okay for you?"

"Oh... Haruaki-kun..."

Haruaki had changed into clothes that were easy to move around in, walking out of the school building towards her. Despite searching for presences all along, she had failed to notice him. Too lax, this ability to concentrate. Unacceptable—Konoha warned herself.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing... On the other hand, Haruaki-kun, why are you out here? It's currently time to rest."

"After going to the washroom, I suddenly felt more awake. Then I started walking around and found you here, Konoha, spacing out."

Standing under the moonlight, he smiled. Konoha felt her heart skip a beat.

Unacceptable—She murmured to herself mentally again. Ahhh, indeed. Right now, the most important thing, what she ought to do was—

Perhaps, it might be fine already.

If under this crescent moon, if in front of his smile—

"Haruaki-kun... I have something... I'd like to tell you."

"Sure, what is it?"

Just say it out—She thought.

Tell him your sins.

That villainous and ugly lie, what she had concealed all this time—

"I-I actually..."

Just at this moment—A presence. This time, Konoha sensed it.

She closed her mouth. Konoha did not know if it was fortunate or not that she failed to tell Haruaki about her secret. However, now was not the time to be pondering that.

"Nuunuu, damn you, Haruaki. I was thinking why you haven't returned from going to the washroom."

"Ficchi, this would normally be called a tryst, right? How heart-poundingly exciting."

"Fear-san, Kuroe-san... With Amanda-san here as well? Why aren't you at the night watchman's room, protecting her?"

"Just when I poked my head out to have a look, Amanda-chan woke up, acting a little awkward like she wanted to go to the toilet . So we took her to the toilet... Then after that, we decided to take a short stroll before going back. By the way, Kiririn is still taking a nap."

"Oh, so it's the same as me huh. I guess it does feel quite unusual to be in school at night. Given the rare chance, everyone wants to take a walk, right—Konoha?"

Konoha raised her hand lightly to signal an end to the conversation.

In a certain sense, Fear and Kuroe could be considered unexpected arrivals, but the presence Konoha sensed was much different from them.

In other words—

"*GOODEST EVENING!* No no, since it's past midnight, I guess I should say *MORNING*, right? I never could figure this out... Anyway, Elsie is back!"

Opposite to the school building where Fear and the other girls had emerged...

Probably entering by traversing over the tightly shut school gates—

Hinai Elsie was walking boldly towards them.

Chapter 4 - The Pendulum After Four Minutes / "A hand stops, but never reverses"

Part 1

Hinai Elsie.

The Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion—«Four Minutes».

Haruaki's group swiftly entered defensive positions against her. Staying on high alert, Haruaki stared at her while she approached leisurely, took out his cellphone and was just thinking he should call when—

"...I have already called Kirika just now to wake her. She should be hurrying over soon."

"Himura-sensei."

Hiding somewhere until now, staying on guard for Elsie's arrival, Himura appeared next to Haruaki's group without them noticing. Holding a cellphone in hand, he was watching Elsie cautiously like Haruaki and the others. Just as he claimed, soon after—

"Sorry I'm late!"

Kirika rushed out of the stairwell. She had already extended the «Tragic Black River» from her sleeve, readying herself for battle.

Having confirmed her arrival, Haruaki operated his cellphone again—To call someone else rather than Kirika. After a brief report, he hung up.

Elsie did not look like she was in a hurry, walking as though taking a casual stroll, taking large strides towards them. She was still quite far away. Fear glanced to the side.

"No matter what, I really hope to move Amanda far away from here... Hey Himura, your mask can eliminate presences, right? If you push the wheelchair while wearing the mask, what's the result?"

"Regrettably, there won't be much effect. For things I'm holding or transportation I'm traveling on, the only effect is reducing the attention they attract from people. Clothing is fine but even if I wear «Il est dans Bastille» while sitting in a car, it won't cause normal drivers to crash violently from being unable to see the car. The same goes for Amanda's wheelchair. Particularly in these circumstances, the enemy will be staring intently at her wheelchair —"

"In other words, you cannot erase your presence together with the wheelchair. What a useless man. Is there anything else you can do?"

"If I had to say more, «Il est dans Bastille» here is unable to completely mask the wearer's hostility and killing intent. When the wearer actively thinks about harming someone, the enemy will see through where he or she is hiding."

"It can't even be used for a sneak attack? What a completely useless man... Then why don't you just wear that mask and stay far away from getting involved!?"

"...Is this an order?"

"Of course it's an order. Otherwise, you're in the way too much. In an emergency, we have no effort to spare for protecting you!"

"I understand. Then I'll retreat for now. But if something arises that I could help with, I will surely help."

Himura took out the evil-looking and familiar mask from the bag by his feet. His presence was extremely weak to begin with. Now that he put this on, he vanished all at once—By the time they noticed, there was completely no trace of him. In actual fact, this was probably just their impression.

Kirika watched with eyes filled with complicated emotions, glaring at the spot where Himura had disappeared. But she immediately shook her head as though casting away those thoughts.

"Well then—We'll just have to use the same tactics as last time. With relatively lower combat strength, Yachi and I will be in charge of Amanda while using this opportunity to move her to a safe location... Any problems?"

"A huge~ problem. I advise you guys to give up. Because it's a waste of effort. Say, while you guys have your backs turned to me, it's already a great crisis, you're giving me a massive opening~"

Elsie commented nonchalantly while pulling out from her collar the «Clockwork Life» pocket watch and swinging it back and forth

.

This is just a bluff—Haruaki thought.

"What bold words... We already know everything about how you fight, your weaknesses and what you've been doing."

"Eh, really?"

Haruaki glanced upwards. Next to the school building's external wall where the large clock was embedded, on a neighboring rooftop, a figure could be seen. This was the person whom Haruaki had just phoned to inform of Elsie's arrival.

"Zenon-san!"

After Haruaki yelled out, the figure nodded lightly and with a flick of her arm, a glimmer of silver light, even fainter than the stars in the far distance, flew towards the clock face. In the next instant, the sound of the protective glass could be heard shattering. Both the long hand and the short hand stopped due to the thrown knife. This was followed by a series of silver flashes as steel knives were repeated thrown to attack the clock's hands, finally—

Accompanied by a crisp cracking sound...

The two hands were severed and their remains fell down in front of the school building. Taking a bow, the figure on the rooftop immediately vanished.

"Ohoh~ I was wondering why all the clocks I found were broken. I see what happened now. Elsie finally *UNDERSTAND*~"

"That's right. In order to prevent you from breaking clocks, in order to prevent the pocket watch in your possession from storing time—"

"Oh my oh my, oh my oh my, what's this~? You guys really don't understand."

Elsie laughed in derision. This reaction sent chills down Haruaki's spine. What was going on? When she broke large clocks, was she not trying to accumulate more time for her pocket watch to use? Could it be that they had... misunderstood something...?

"What~ a~ shame~ I'm sorry to say this, but Elsie has already stored up the full *four minutes* already!"

"What—No way, so the three you broke in the beginning, were enough for you to already...?"

Fear groaned, causing Elsie to laugh with abundant mirth.

"So I'll explain, that's not how it works~ The act of breaking clocks is simply a necessary step in prior preparations to allow this «Clockwork Life» to store up time, but it's not the actual process for storing time itself. This tool was created by a certain clockmaker who wanted everyone to understand that 'time and life are equally important.' Hence, 'I never noticed usually but time and clocks turn out to be so important after all' is the kind of feeling this pocket watch gathers from the surrounding people to

use as energy. Everyone usually doesn't notice but once a clock they're used to reading is broken, they will think: 'Oh no, this clock was actually so convenient' before taking out a cellphone from their pocket. In other words, this type of feeling that people develop towards clocks is what I'm gathering. Although a single person's feelings are weak, large clocks are all located where crowds gather, so naturally, it's possible to gather feelings from many people. Like slowly accumulating a tenth of a second, a tenth of a second repeatedly... In this manner, this pocket watch finally begins to define the time known as life."

In that case—

In that case, in other words, what they had been doing all along

"That's right, you guys ended up helping Elsie. All Elsie only needed to do was run over to stand under a disabled clock in order to collect the feelings from all the surrounding people with inconvenience written on their faces. So I guess I should still thank you all—You saved me a lot of effort, thanks!"

Right before their eyes as they watched in shock—

Elsie slowly reached towards the her pocket watch's stem—

As though showing off to them, the spring of the cursed watch clicked while it was being wound.

Part 2

Hinari Elsie listened with delight to the sound of «Clockwork Life»'s spring being wound.

Surrounding her, the spring was not the only clock sound she was hearing.

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.

A clock's inorganic noise was calming. Without it, she could not possibly live on—Literally.

These clock ticks were coming from the headphones she was wearing on her ears, the music being played nonstop on repeat by her portable music player.

This was the curse of «Clockwork Life». She must listen to the sound of clocks. As soon as she stopped hearing the sound, her body would be overcome by a sense of extreme discomfort and nausea. Although not to the point of causing immediate death, should the shortage persist, she would probably go insane and die within a day. However, she was never worried at all. Because this was the way things were. She was going to listen to this sound forever. Starting from the moment she first obtained this tool, forever—

Guided by a clock's steady sounds, past scenes surfaced in Elsie's mind.

Once upon a time in a certain town, there was an insane clockmaker. He loved clocks and watches zealously and only made bizarre timepieces. As a result, he lived in destitute poverty, finally

going mad, unable to win recognition from others. Hence, he started advocating that time ruled over everything; time was precious. To people, time was "life" itself.

Starting from some unknown point in time, he started believing that his mission in life was to spread this truth among the other foolish humans. Hence, he began to take action towards this goal.

Namely, he would lock two people in a cellar and make them kill each other. These two people would be linked by an existing, deep bond such as being family or lovers. Once he prepared the location and the circumstances, all he said was the following.

I'll give you four minutes to kill each other. If one of you succeeds, the survivor shall go free. Once the time limit is reached, I will release poison gas to kill you both.

Finally, to inspire the foolish humans, he gave a single hint—"Time is life."

The cellar contained nothing, except for a pocket watch that merely counted up to four minutes, specially made for this experiment, attached to a long silver chain. One minute to grasp the situation, one minute to hesitate, one minute to understand what needed to be done and commit oneself, one minute to take actual action. Hence, he decided on these four minutes as the time limit.

Everyone locked in the cellar died. Confronted with an order to kill a loved one, everyone was at a loss on what to do. Meanwhile, four minutes passed and the clockmaker released the poison gas.

Among the victims, there were some who made their decision to kill the other person, but they either met opposition or failed to kill within four minutes. Barehanded, there was simply not enough time.

However, the clockmaker was not asking for something impossible. He had given a hint.

Only one person understood his hint.

Only one girl, locked into the cellar together with her father, understood the significance in the words "time is precious" and *used the only tool present in the cellar, namely, the pocket watch's long silver chain, to strangle her father to death—*

In terms of time, this was but a moment's reminiscence.

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.

Currently, Elsie found the ticking sounds, coming from both her headphones and the pocket watch in her hand, especially nostalgic. In that particular cellar, this pocket watch was making these noises as it mercilessly marched on for four minutes.

In this dream-like state yet not in a dream, she kept staring at the clock hands. The rhythmic movement seemed extremely slow to her. Like eons—yet a brief duration.

Ahhh, the clockmaker's ideas were not wrong—Back then, the time defined by this pocket watch was indeed life itself. The time known as her own life was concentrated in those four minutes.

Click click. Click click. Elsie turned the watch stem. She had already spun it enough for two minutes' worth, probably. But still not done yet, still too early. Click click. Click click.

Time, i.e. life, was gradually injected into the pocket watch. New power was injected into the pocket watch.

Then «Clockwork Life» began to animate.

It was as though it were trying to imitate the answer prepared by that clockmaker back then.

Part 3

While Elsie was winding the spring, the pocket watch's silver chain began to squirm.

The silver chain's tail end shook, jumped and vibrated, flying out of her collar like a living creature. Presumably, Elsie had been keeping the silver chain wrapped around her neck. The silver chain flew out and continued to squirm nonstop. Rattling continuously while it slid, sliding towards Elsie's neck, shoulders

and breasts, then wrapping around her many times. Such a long chain could not possibly have been kept concealed beneath her clothing all this time, so—Did the silver chain extend?

Haruaki's group watched in terror as this unusual scene unfolded. Of course, Konoha and the girls were biding their time, looking for an opening to charge forward and attack—Nevertheless, Elsie continued to turn the watch stem, unconcerned with the silver chain that was slithering like a snake, her body giving off a dangerous pressure that made others fearful of making a false move.

"Ooh... I was thinking you guys might come charging to attack me while I was turning the watch stem. How right a decision you made. If you had recklessly entered my attack range, even while I was in the middle of winding, I can still activate the cursed ability and quickly slaughter you."

The silver chain continued to squirm. While extending in length, it wrapped itself around Elsie's entire body, twisting many times around her neck as though treating her like a prisoner, sliding across her cleavage between her breasts, sliding into her skirt and between her thighs, spiraling to tie her arms downwards—

Elsie continued to turn the watch stem. Despite her body being tightly bound by the silver chain, apart from pain, she seemed to be experiencing other sensations as well—



"Ahhh... Coming, coming, coming! Ahhh... Hooh... Mmm... I-It's taking effect... Coming coming, motivation is coming! *HIGH TENSION!*"

Finally, after Elsie's body shook once, especially violently, she forcefully turned to pocket watch's stem, which then made a crisp "click." For that instant, she seemed to be immersed in some sort of aftertaste, her head hanging low without moving.

"Hmm...!"

Thinking this must be a good chance, Kirika pushed Amanda's wheelchair and tried to move. However—

"...«Clockwork Life»."

"What... the!"

The sound of a concrete wall getting pierced could be heard. No sooner had Kirika taken a single step when a flash of silver light extended from Elsie's hand, preventing Kirika from advancing any further. The object buried into the school building's external wall was undoubtedly—

"Controlling the silver chain... To the point of possessing powers similar to the «Tragic Black River»...!?"

"No no~ Accuracy and extensibility are completely nothing amazing~ Right now, I also missed. This is basically the only type of move I'm capable of using. Besides, swinging a weapon from a distance is not my style, so I usually do things this way."

Shortening the silver chain that had pierced the school building's wall, she pulled it back to her hand. Wrapping the silver chain around the set of fingers on her right hand, she clenched her fist, turning the chain into a fist guard, a tool for increasing the destructive power of punches.

"Then... Are we ready? As soon as Elsie's left hand leaves the watch stem, time will begin. The four minutes with your lives on the line will begin. Ready *OKAY?*"

"Guh!" Fear and the girls clenched their teeth tightly, exuding a sense of tension from all over them.

"Hmph... We just need to keep Amanda safe and endure for four minutes. Too easy, hahaha."

Fear spoke in a stiff tone of voice that did not match what she was saying. Konoha nodded in turn.

"Our priorities remain the same. Ueno-san, Haruaki-kun, as soon as you find an opportunity, take Amanda-san and leave this place. Although she says the accuracy is not high, given that the enemy possesses a long range weapon—This is probably no easy task."

"...Yes. Originally, I was thinking I might be able to use the «Tragic Black River» to pull us up to the roof, but that looks like it's not going to work. We'll be struck down on our way up. Besides, given that silver chain, she could very well climb up in pursuit as well."

"If only my hair could pin down her movements to some extent. Hmm, what should we do...?"

Elsie slowly raised the pocket watch before her chest.

Her eyes seemed to be expressing enjoyment of the current situation while she swept her gaze over the group in their defensive stances.

Then she extended her tongue to lick her lips, while at the same time—

She released the watch stem.

"Well then... Let's begin. Although time is very short, I hope you'll savor things carefully—bestowed upon you all, the last of your *clockwork life*!"

Tick tock, tick tock.

In front of her chest, the pocket watch advanced, second by second.

Until the pocket watch stopped—Four minutes still remained.

Part 4

"We'll try to stop her. Even if we can't stop her, we must create an environment easier for engaging her in battle!"

The first to take action was Kuroe. With unprecedentedly serious eyes, she took a step forward.

"Mode: «Sargasso Tsunemori»!"

Kuroe's hair spread out along the surrounding floor in a wide area, forming a black carpet—or a sea of sargasso seaweed. This sea of hair kept bulging upwards in certain places, forming ripples and exhibiting a chaotic form similar to a dense forest of marine flora, waiting for the invader to arrive. As soon as some one stepped into the zone, a great amount of hair would surely entangle the person's ankles without warning, preventing them from taking another step outside. This was an inescapable trap territory.

"I get what you're trying to do, but all she needs is jump across!"

"In that case, I'm counting on you two to intercept her! Compared to her running over, this will be easier to pinpoint her direction!"

"I see! Then leave it to me, Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form: «Breaking Wheel of Francia»!"

Fear transformed the Rubik's cube into the torture wheel. Elsie had already started using her compressed time to move at high

speed, breaking into a mad dash. As Kuroe predicted, she jumped high just before Kuroe's hair carpet. Discerning her route of advance, Fear was just about to throw the torture wheel at her landing spot when—

"Too naive!"

In midair, Elsie once again extended the silver chain that was wrapped around her fist, looping it around the trunk of a decorative tree then quickly shortening the chain to produce tension—At the same time, she stepped onto the chain, extended straight and taut through the air, then ran along the chain in this manner.

"Th-That's way too unreasonable...!"

Haruaki groaned but the situation still did not improve. Using the wire created by the chain she had shot out, Elsie traversed the sargasso sea of black hair, circling over to their side. Her movements were like a mirage, zigzagging at high speed, meanwhile with a forceful kick, she crushed the paved path underfoot and closed in rapidly. Since this sargasso sea was essentially spread out in the forward direction, the sides were quite weakly defended. Taking a light leap, Elsie swung her fist at Kuroe who was frantically turning her gaze.

"Kuroe! Pull your hair back!"

"Ku... «Cushioning Munemori»!"

Hair, which was originally by Kuroe's feet, instantly gathered and shot up to form a shield to block the impact. Next, Fear's thrown wheel stood further forward, forming a second shield. Nevertheless, even with this double defense, Elsie's destructive might could not be stopped. The wheel creaked from the impact while Kuroe's body was sent flying from the ground, her petite body smashing into the bushes, breaking branches and causing a large amount of leaves to flutter in the air.

"Damn... it...!"

"Ohoh!"

Fear gripped the torture wheel hard then threw it out. Elsie struck it down using her chain-wrapped fist.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

"That's quite some spirit you have there! But it's a little too much spirit! Absolutely the *GOODEST*!"

The massive hatchet's swing was parried as well. Then a flowing backhanded fist immediately attacked, striking Fear in the head, rendering her petite body instantly unsteady. Nevertheless, Fear gritted her teeth hard and pushed her body, swinging the blade again. This time, Elsie countered with a hook to the gut.

"Gah-hah...!"

Liquid flowed out from the corners of Fear's lips, perhaps saliva or stomach juices, a painful sight to behold nonetheless. She stabbed the hatchet into the ground to serve as support and prevent herself from flying backwards—Even so, the impact still forced Fear's body to slide back a couple meters. Elsie closed in on Fear with lightning speed again, raising her snow-white thigh in a kick towards her chest. Fear was supposed to be quite heavy but in spite of that, her body was effortlessly sent hovering to midair. Fear groaned painfully and swung her hatchet down forcefully while in the air, trying hard to retaliate. However, Elsie turned her body lightly and dodged Fear's attack again. The hatchet embedded itself into the ground. Elsie clenched her fist and laughed:

"Oh my oh my... Aren't you durable? I guess I'll wait until later to destroy you! Because right now, my goal is to quickly kill off that straggler! So it's time for you to stand down!"

"I... re... fuse! Sorry, but I won't hold back, so don't hate me! Mechanism No.12 extinction type, revolving blade form: «Tornado of Souls»!"

Fear left the hatchet stuck in the ground then jumped back herself, transmitting the order to transform through the chain of cubes. Using the momentary opening when she dodged Elsie's fist by the slimmest of margins, she converted the hatchet next to Elsie into the revolving pillar of blades. Without any hesitation, she instantly caused the tornado of blades to spin at top speed—

"Wow! This is such a fun *ATTRACTION! THRILLING!*"

"Wha—!"

Elsie blocked the blades with the silver chain on her fist then bent down and jumped lightly. Despite being in range of the bladed pillar that was spinning faster than the naked eye could follow, she dodged every single blade. Then weaving past the tornado of blades, closing in on Fear at a certain separation—

"«Clockwork Life»!"

Wrapped around her fist, the silver chain extended its end towards the side, aiming for a decorative rock that stood up from its buried position in the center of a lawn. Within the blink of an eye, the chain wrapped itself around the giant boulder, roughly stout enough for a person to hold in one's arms, uprooting it from the soil. Next, using centrifugal force, Elsie swept the boulder horizontally, tied up by the chain, towards Fear's body—

Fear had probably expected Elsie to charge her directly and reacted half a beat too slow. Unable to recall her torture tool in time, she was mercilessly struck by the thick hammer of rock. Sent flying as though struck by a car, Fear's entire body bounced away. At the same time, accompanied by series of cracking sounds, something breaking could be heard. But when Fear smashed into the wall of the school building, these sounds were instantly covered up by the loud crash from the impact.

"Haha~ How rare for me to have such perfect control. Wonderful, wonderful."

Haruaki could do nothing but watch. No problem. There should be no problem. Absolutely no problem. Surely, Fear and Kuroe were going to stand up soon. How long would it take? A minute? Too long, damn it—!

As though taking over for Fear, Konoha swiftly closed in on Elsie. With an astoundingly savage expression, she chopped with her hands, her legs, using all sorts of martial techniques, she engaged Elsie in direct combat.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Looks like you're all fired up too! Five, six, seven... Amazing, that's a new record! *EXCELLENT!*"

After throwing the rock away, she wrapped the silver chain around her fist again and began to play a song of heavy metal while clashing nonstop with Konoha's knife hand. Before the noise vanished, the next set of noises appeared, followed by another set of noises. Haruaki's eyes could no longer follow the scene before him. Through vague afterimages, he could only see objects moving back and forth at astoundingly high speeds between the two girls.

Smack! Then completely different noises began to creep into the earlier sounds. The sound of skin getting torn open, flesh getting sliced open, bones creaking noisily. Konoha began to bleed from various parts of her body, because she was gradually unable to deflect all of Elsie's attacks.

"I admit you're trying hard. But in this world, there exist things that cannot be solved by mere motivation. Just like the way no one can stop the passage of time."

"Guh... Ahhh... Ahhhhhh—!"

"In other words, what Elsie mean is that time is valuable and it's time for you to stand down—Are you listening? Hmm, you don't actually look like you're listening!"

Elsie suddenly ducked down as though her back had snapped. Then Konoha made a thrust with her knife hand. In the next instant, Elsie stretched her body upwards while her bare knee had already embedded itself deeply into Konoha's chest. To think that she had used her knee in a cross countering strike... Absolutely unbelievable.

"Ga-ah...!"

"You've done very well. Truly very *GOODEST*. In past tense, I guess it's *GOODESTED*?"

After Konoha stopped moving, Elsie raised her clasped hands together to deliver a hammering blow to the back of Konoha's head. Konoha crashed down like a mannequin, her head striking the ground hard. Cracks instantly appeared on the paved path as concrete fragments flew away. Probably through sheer willpower alone, Konoha groaned and attempted to stand up—But of course, she was unable to do so.

...Two minutes.

In the end, in merely two minutes, everyone was down.

But giving up because of that was not an option. Haruaki desperately mustered strength in his legs that were almost about to give way. Glaring at Elsie, he pondered what he should do, what could he do—

"So, so, although it's the same situation as previously, this time, the happy time of life continues to turn. In other words, your time has ended. Hurry and let Elsie finish the job!"

Elsie charged at high speed. Instantly, Haruaki felt someone shove him hard, causing him to roll on the ground.

Naturally, the one who pushed him was the person who was protecting the wheelchair-bound Amanda together with him—

"Come on, at least I can tell what you're thinking... Absolutely ridiculous. Indeed, it's truly and absolutely ridiculous. I'm the one who should be doing this first instead. This is my duty. Just like that time...!"

After pushing Haruaki away, Kirika stepped in front of the wheelchair, the «Tragic Black River» sliding out of her sleeve. In the face of Elsie's intimidating aura, the «Tragic Black River» seemed quite small and powerless in comparison.

"As a sign of respect for Miss Japanese Sword for trying so hard just now, Elsie will use a knifehand strike as well to take care of

you! I'll first skewer your body then chop you apart together with your clothes, finally stabbing into Mummy Maker's heart all at once! *EXCITING!*"

The same scene was about to be replayed, with Kirika planning to use herself as a meat shield, with Kirika planning to use her immortal body as a meat shield, along with Elsie in complete nonchalance, Elsie who possessed the power to completely annihilate Kirika's immortality.

Last time, they were saved only because Elsie had reached her time limit. But now... Currently it was still—

"No... Class Rep!"

Elsie effortlessly dodged the extending «Tragic Black River» and closed in swiftly. Kirika did not move. Because Amanda was right behind her, she could not move.

Hence, Elsie's knife hand was swinging at high speed, slicing through the air faster than the naked eye could follow, to "kill" Kirika—

"—Kirika!"

The body of the man who had suddenly taken off his mask and appeared...

The hand stabbed into Himura's body when he rushed out in front of Kirika to protect her.

Part 5

The feeling of her hand burying into flesh. The splatter of the familiar color. The familiar odor of the viscous body fluid.

Hinari Elsie did not feel any regret at all. In fact, it was the opposite.

Instead, she was thinking that she had accomplished her task concretely.

She had no idea why she needed to do it. Neither was she interested.

All she needed to do was act according to that man's orders. Simply as a knight of the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion, obeying the words of him who stood as the absolute ruler.

She recalled that voice over the telephone.

'Do you understand?'

(Yes, my lord, I understand clearly.)

'The target will block your way at the last moment. Do not miss that opportunity. I repeat once more...'

(Yes, I won't miss the opportunity. I will definitely accomplish it
!)

The sense of achievement made Elsie's back tremble. She had fulfilled her mission perfectly.

Recalling the words the Dominion Lord finally said to her, Elsie climaxed once again as expected.

'Do not forget. Your target—*The man named Himura Sunao.*'

Part 6

"Huummm... Ahaa..."

Drawing out her bloodstained hand, Elsie stayed in place for some reason, her back shuddering in waves.

"Ga-hah..."

"H-Himura...?"

Himura's body instantly collapsed with a crash. Kirika gazed down at him in disbelief. A large hole had pierced Himura's abdomen and blood kept gushing out.

Haruaki could see Kirika's legs suddenly lose strength as she collapsed on her knees, her wavering eyes staring at Himura, watching him who had received a heavy injury to protect her.

"W-Why? But... I'm... immortal...!"

"Cough cough... You should... also know, right? There is no concrete evidence... that you cannot die. Even.. if there really is... but I... Because I... am serious. That's why... I want to... protect you. .."

"__"

Kirika's eyes wavered even more as she reached her hand out slowly towards Himura's body.

"I-I..."

Kirika's face was showing an expression that Haruaki had never witnessed before. As though feeling fear about something, yet agonizing over a dilemma, also appearing to be seeing something beyond what was before her eyes, also accompanied by pain, recalling distant memories from the past—

But just at this moment—

Kirika's hand suddenly stopped just as she was about to touch Himura's body.

A furrow appeared on Kirika's brow. Groaning while looking up, stumbling as she tried hard to stand up, Fear and the others were looking at Kirika. Having lost cognition, Amanda was looking at her. Only Elsie was the exception, still dazed with ecstasy on her face.

Kirika's hand did not touch Himura's body. Keeping her arm half extended, she remained motionless.

What was Kirika pondering?

What was she thinking?

Also—What was she remembering?

Naturally, only Kirika alone would know.

Part 7

She remained rooted to the spot in shock for quite a while.

What was visible to the eye—or invisible to the eye—both were leaving her in disbelief.

What happened? What was going on in the current situation?

"...Kirika."

"Ah... Himura-senpai, it's been a while."

While she was in a daze, he had started standing behind her. Truly, it had been a while since they last met.

Upon joining the Lab Chief's Nation, Kirika was assigned to a department, but due to a lack of progress and accomplishment, this department was scrapped several weeks earlier. After all, funding was not unlimited, this was only natural... In these matters, her brother was quite rational and decisive.

The department's personnel were all split up and reassigned to other departments. Kirika and Himura were no exception. Presumably, the higher-ups decided that Kirika did not need to follow a mentor anymore. Indeed, Kirika was also confident that she had already grown quite accustomed to this organization, the Lab Chief's Nation. Even in a new department, her research was going quite smoothly—although she also felt that the higher-ups had intentionally assigned her to a department whose research could be successfully carried out by someone like her.

After the department was scrapped, Kirika found herself estranged from Himura for quite some time. But rather than a sense of nostalgia, she was more confounded by the sight before her. Perhaps he might know something about it.

"That... puppy... is gone. But clearly, he was still here yesterday as usual... Did someone take him out for a walk? Senpai, do you know where he went?"

"...Unknown. Indeed, why do I get this kind of feeling... Unknown."

He looked quite strange, his eyes simply staring blankly at the empty kennel. Apart from that, nothing seemed to be reflecting in his eyes, not even Kirika who was standing before him.

"So that's why I am pursuing. I desire. I desire *that*, even if it means forsaking all else..."

"...Senpai? Uh... What is it that you desire...?"

At this time, he finally focused his gaze on her. Directly, sincerely—yet madly.

Inexplicably, Kirika's back shuddered in terror.

Terrifying. The way he was right now... Terrifying.

"What did you want to ask me? Of course it's you. Kirika. I desire you."

"Eh...?"

"Immersing myself in research all along, I experienced it for the first time. I am certain that this is the greatest research theme that cannot be elucidated even by devoting a lifetime's effort. This is my happiness. As long as I obtain you, I will feel happy. So in order to obtain you, I am willing to do anything. I have been poisoned by the happiness named Kirika and at the same time, infected by the hunger for the happiness named Kirika. However, the fools have separated me from you, transferring you to a promising laboratory where you don't need to do any dirty work, while assigning me to a dull laboratory that could be scrapped any moment. This means forcing me to produce results, right? Very well, in that case, I shall produce results. In order to become a man worthy of you. Hence, I used it."

"You used... it...?"

"My happiness... My happiness belongs only to me... to me alone. Hence, it was perfect."

Himura was essentially confessing his love to her right now. However, it did not matter. Kirika could not dispel the awful premonition occupying her mind. Gulping, she asked the man who exuded a dangerous aura, standing before her like the devil.

"...Where is that child?"

He smiled gently and said:

"Don't worry. You can see it if you come to my lab—*although only the head remains by this point.*"

Kirika instantly collapsed and sat on the ground, her view felt as though the entire world was spinning around. Her brain was about to overheat. Discomfort, nausea. In fact, she really did vomit. He simply watched her without saying a word. Scorching, scorching. Both her body and the depths of her mind felt scorching .

Ah, that's what this is—Fury.

Never experienced before, almost maddening—Wrath.

Kirika swallowed her sour and bitter saliva, looking up.

"You used that child—to use... in an experiment...?"

"I forgot to mention something important. If explaining too much caused me to fail in conveying my main point, that would be putting the cart before the horse. So I must state clearly for the record—Kirika, I love you."

They were clearly talking past each other. No good. This person
, this man—

Stop screwing around. Stop screwing around. Stop screwing
around!

By himself, he continued to pratter incessantly:

"Recently, I produced quite splendid results. Soon after, we
should be able to work together again. I expect to receive valuable
Wathes afterwards... Oh right, although I only heard by chance,
you seem to have recently obtained a Wathe possessing excellent
cursed abilities—"

So what? So what!? What 'I love you'? To think she believed so
much in him. All this time, she had deemed so many researchers
as inhumane and insane. So he turned out to be one of them. He?
No, calling him 'that guy' was sufficient. What 'I love you'? Totally
disgusting, nauseating. Unforgivable. She could not empathize
with any of this. Completely crazy. To think that guy murdered
the puppy for the sake of research. Impossible to understand.
Anger and derision overflowed endlessly.

Hence, all she did was murmur softly.

Directed towards everything before her eyes—

From the bottom of her heart—

Accompanied by a curse.

"Honestly—Absolutely ridiculous...!"

Part 8

A momentary daydream. After experiencing a feeling similar to dizziness, Kirika regained her senses.

Before her eyes was Himura collapsed. He was currently staring at her intently. Her hand was extended halfway, stopped in midair. If his wound were not examined quickly to stop the bleeding, he could very well die. Even so, her hand remained motionless.

"Arghhh... How absolutely ridiculous..."

"Class... Rep...?"

Pushed aside by her just now, Haruaki sat up and gazed at her. He must be trying to ask her why she stopped. Until that very instant, this same question had surfaced in her own mind.

However, she figured it out now. Due to that daydream, she understood everything.

Why she had suddenly stopped—That was because she felt that something was not right.

Kirika glanced at Elsie who was staring into space with a face filled with ecstasy. Although Kirika had no idea why she was like that, it did not matter because at this close range, there was

nothing that Kirika could do if Elsie decided to act again. Hence, she could only take a gamble on Elsie not taking action for the next while.

"Yachi... I know the situation doesn't permit this. I also hope you won't see me as cold and heartless. However, for just a moment—Please give me some time."

"Time...?"

"Yes, give me time to confirm."

Kirika answered briefly before turning her gaze to meet Himura's eyes again. She could feel the cold from the bottom of her heart. Indeed, she was cold and heartless after all, even in this critical moment of life and death, she was still suspicious of others, unbelievably.

However, she must suspect.

Present on scene was not only herself but Haruaki and the other girls. If anything happened as a result of a superficial, humane impulse—If she was the only one to perish, that could not be helped. But she absolutely refused to let the others get caught up in it.

Staring at the collapsed Himura, Kirika questioned:

"Before I help you up, allow me to confirm one matter—Why did you take off your mask before rushing in front of Elsie?"

Himura did not answer. Kirika continued to point out what she had found suspicious.

"If you wanted to protect me, fine. But your «Il est dans Bastille» only erases the sense of presence. It does not mean that your body disappears physically. Even if you continued to wear the mask while forcing your way between Elsie and me, her hand would still pierce your body unknowingly. As a result, it doesn't change the fact of acting as a meat shield. But why, under those urgent conditions, did you still forcibly take off the mask? If there's any reason, hurry up and tell me."

"...Ha."

Himura laughed instead.

At the same time, he swiftly took out a rectangular object from his front pocket and raised it before Kirika's eyes.

Not a weapon. From the looks of it, the object seemed to be a rectangular, wooden, photo frame but without the photo that should be kept inside it. Then feeling a terrifying chill, Kirika reflexively distanced herself from him.

Himura slowly sat up, then glancing at the thing that resembled a photo frame in his hand, he laughed as though finding something ludicrous.

"Haha... Hahaha... Really? So in the end, it still didn't work? *Even after going this far, it still didn't work!?* Hahahahaha!"

Part 9

While Haruaki could not comprehend what was going on, the situation continued to develop. The clock's hands continued to turn.

"If it doesn't work, it can't be helped. I have already prepared myself for a change of plans."

While slowly standing up, Himura muttered quietly, mixed with laughter. Standing in front of Haruaki's group who were utterly baffled, he turned his gaze and said:

"Hina! Elsie, «Four Minutes». It's me."

"Ah... This voice... My lord...!"

Originally in a daze, Elsie's eyes recovered a sense of self-awareness. Haruaki's group could not comprehend what she said. Lord? Was she referring to Himura?

"How much longer are you going to space out for? *The next target is Yachi Haruaki. Kill him.* That will achieve the state of shock required to activate this «Article 15»."

"Yes! As long as it's your wish!"

Elsie turned her gaze towards them. The entire group shuddered.

"Guh... Ooh. Damn it, what the heck is going on...!?"

"No idea. But now is not the time to worry about that! «Tragic Black River»!"

The cursed belt extended forward to restrain Elsie. Although it was instantly cut into shreds, it did achieve in buying an opening of a few seconds.

"Kuroe-san! *Please throw me!* Hurry!"

Collapsed on the ground, Konoha turned back into a Japanese sword. Crawling out from the bushes, Kuroe used her hair to grab the sword and threw Konoha towards Haruaki. A second before Elsie entered attack range, the Japanese sword flew into Haruaki's hands.

"Don't think you'll succeed... I absolutely won't let you succeed!"

Konoha's howl resembled a scream. The Japanese sword was controlling Haruaki's body fiercely, bringing out his body's full potential to strike down Elsie's attacks. I can't see. I really can't see anything. Was Konoha and the others fighting this kind of opponent all along? Simply in blocking, I can hear my bones creak. Simply in dodging, I feel like my muscles are about to tear apart.

What about the time? What about the time? Not yet? Still not yet?

The despairing instant seemed to stretch on forever. The situation was changing every second—but in a deteriorating direction.

After Kuroe extended a bundle of hair, Elsie used her right hand's silver chain to entangle the hair in reverse, then severing it with a forceful twist. Elsie also grabbed Kirika's extended «Tragic Black River», pulling her in, then immediately sent her flying with a left punch. This alone was enough of a severe injury to almost break and fracture Kirika's shoulder. All covered in wounds, Fear rushed forward, wielding her drill. Elsie lifted her leg and kicked downwards, sending Fear sinking into the ground. All this happened simultaneously.

Then—

"Ahhh... Ahhhhhh! I-I must protect Haruaki-kun! Absolutely!"

"Wow~ Amazing amazing. But I think this is already the limit when you're relying on a human body."

As Elsie spoke, Haruaki felt a sharp pain coming from somewhere on his body. In that instant, his mind was plunged into darkness.

Instantly, he realized it was the end for something.

A spear hand strike was aiming towards his heart. Resisting in desperation, Konoha controlled Haruaki's stiff arm. Instead of her

own body, the sword, simply forcing Haruaki's arm to extend in front of his heart was already taking all of Konoha's efforts.

Elsie's fingertips penetrated Haruaki's arm. Then Haruaki felt an astounding impact. Completely unrelated to awareness, simply due to damage to the body's physical structure, Haruaki could feel the Japanese sword falling from his hand. Then after he flew backwards a great distance, his back smashed hard against the ground—

Finally after a second's delay, massive pain arrived.

He could not suppress a scream.

"Uwah—AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?"

Part 10

A lot of time still remained. How completely effortless.

"Here comes the finishing blow." Just as Hinai Elsie intended to advance with lively footsteps—

Suddenly, she felt a chill down her spine.

This was a presence from hell, cold, merciless and cruel at the same time, one that she had never felt before. As though drawn by the darkness behind her, Elsie looked back.

Extremely close range, near enough to feel the other party's breath. Left and right in midair. Time seemed to stop for an instant

.

Rushing in rapidly, the two figures spoke simultaneously in a tone of voice as cold as ice, completely devoid of emotion:

"Die."

Part 11

Fear was listening to Haruaki's scream, listening to a scream that made her heart tremble.

She could feel her past memories, a dark presence rearing its head from the depths of her body.

The pulsation of insanity, the thirst for violence. After an instant of boiling, her brain had gone cold after boiling excessively. Amidst these cold thoughts, *Fear partially accepted her darkness.*

She would not go insane enough to lose sight of her enemy, but she shall allow violence to rule her. After all, the enemy had done something so terrible.

—Absolutely unforgivable.

She wanted to use the «Iron Maiden» to open large holes in that girl's body. She wanted to use «The Duke of Exeter's Daughter» to stretch that girl's body out for shredding. She wanted to use the «Inquisitional Wheel» to violently crush that girl's spine. She

wanted to use «The Flocking Storks» to deprive that girl of her freedom, giving her a long period of time to reflect upon her sins. She wanted to use «The Blessed Virgin Mary's Steel Embrace» to surround that girl with death's embrace. She wanted to use the «Cat's Paw» to carve incomparably ugly scars on that girl's back. She wanted to use the «Spanish Spiders» to hang that girl up like an onion, sun-dried into a dessicated human. She wanted to use «The Teeth» to shave away that girl's limbs while inflicting pain and suffering. She wanted to use the «Judas Cradle» to pierce that girl's crotch, allowing her to die in shame and anger.

Ahhh, not enough. She had already lost several of the violent acts she sought. Irritating.

Even so, what she needed to do remained the same.

Even if the types of pain she could inflict had grown fewer in number, there was still only one end result. Currently, that alone was sufficient.

So, girl. Foolish sinner whose name I've even forgotten. Rejoice all you want.

—I will kill you.

Muramasa Konoha was looking at Haruaki's blood, looking at the color she absolutely did not wish to see.

Dizziness. Chills. Nausea.

However, she understood very well. Now was not the time to be feeling unwell. Neither was it time for trembling, vomiting, or staying her hand from reaching towards the enemy who had committed an unforgivable crime.

Ice-cold wrath compelled her to steel her determination. It compelled her to steel her determination to admit.

Currently, there was no need.

No need for that sort of lie.

Once she admitted it, the color of fresh blood, visible in the surroundings, began to convey other meanings. It became extremely nostalgic, exciting, causing one's heart to leap, and exceptionally—

Satisfying.

Dizziness, chills and nausea had all vanished. Hence, she simply sprang into action.

Casting away the lie she had been telling since a long long time ago.

She had not lifted her curse at all—

Neither was she even close to lifting it—

Her curse, equally deep as that shouldered by the cube of torture and execution, continued to surround herself—

Her fear of seeing fresh blood was not due to the backlash of almost lifting her curse—

Rather, it was only because it reminded her of the fact *that she had simply undergone self-hypnosis in order to stay with him.*

She simply took action.

O fool who intends to take his life. Enemy whom I resent even more than the Tokugawa. Boast all you want.

—I will kill you.

Haruaki's view was blurred by the tears from the pain, but there were definitely two figures ahead.

Fear and Konoha were closing in on Elsie. Despite clearly lying sprawled on the ground a second ago after being blown away. Despite clearly spinning in the air as a Japanese sword a second ago.

"Mechanism No.3 severance type, descending form: «Guillotine
»!"

"!"

Elsie drew her neck back. The iron guillotine made a metallic grating sound right in front of her face. After turning back to

human form, Konoha jumped, unconcerned with her full nudity, attacking at high speed with her four limbs in midair. Elsie bit her lip and attacked with her fist in return.

"Guh... Ah... Oahhhhhh!"

Crack! With the sound of something shattering, Elsie and Konoha jumped back from each other. Elsie simply retreated a few steps but the silver chain on her fist had been severed. She made the chain extend from the severed location and wrapped it around her fist once more. In front of her gaze was Konoha who was bent over the ground on all fours like a beast.

Had Fear and Konoha lost their self-awareness? Haruaki was not sure. Fear was not quite the same as the last time when she was devoured by past memories. Konoha was also acting differently from when she lost herself to anger in the past.

But compared to those past occasions, the two of them were even more scary now.

Without any eye contact, they simply spoke quietly:

"O cube, thou shalt not hinder me."

"Cut the crap."

This short exchange served as some sort of secret signal. Simultaneously, they started taking action in perfect unison.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi», Curse Calling!"

Fear held the hatchet up and swung it down forcefully. Unlike previous times, she did not attack with the back of the blade. This time, she swung the front edge as hard as she could, a slashing strike filled with intent to kill. Elsie dodged swiftly. As though having predicted this, Konoha jumped straight over Fear's petite body and rushed at Elsie. After receiving Konoha's attack, «Clockwork Life»'s silver chain was cut and fell apart. Having lost her defense, Elsie's fist began to show minor cuts where blood flew out. Konoha was supposed to be quite afraid of blood—But for some reason, she did not stop. The instant she landed, she spread both legs to rotate her body and swept her leg, imbued with a sword's sharpness, towards Elsie's lower body. Elsie's body was strengthened to begin with, as a result of time compression, but Konoha in her current state was able to cut her fist even when protected by the silver chain. Elsie had no time to extend the silver chain to her legs for defense. In order to dodge Konoha's sweeping kick, Elsie jumped lightly—

"!"

She made eye contact with Fear who was looking up at her from almost directly underneath. Crouching on one knee on the ground next to Konoha, Fear had withdrawn her hatchet that was buried in the paved path, ordering the hatchet to transform.

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»!"

Fear twisted her body and shot the execution stake upwards at a very steep angle, in other words, straight into the air where Elsie had jumped.

Extremely close range. Despite being unable to brake in midair, Elsie still yelled loudly:

"Don't think... you can hit me—!"



She twisted her head forcefully. Originally going to pierce her face, the execution stake shaved off a large chunk of flesh instead, brushing past her neck and flying towards the school building behind, stabbing high up the outer wall, causing concrete to shatter and fall with a clatter.

Immediately, the vector of Elsie's jump turned to descent, intending to crush Konoha and Fear with the speed of her falling momentum, but the two girls dodged the attack at the very last moment. Due to rolling on the ground to evade the attack, they both lost balance. Elsie must have found it an excellent opportunity. As soon as she landed, she raised both arms, intending to swing them towards the two girls at the same time—

"—Don't you think that I'm much cooler like this, compared to that itty bitty pocket watch?"

"What... the...?"

"I can measure time too. I will use this pendulum to measure out the time for extinguishing life! Mechanism No.4 swinging type, oscillatory form: «The Pendulum», Curse Calling!"

The chain of cubes held in Fear's hand seemed to rattle. Connected to that chain was the execution stake she had just launched, currently stuck to the school building's external wall. But now, it was no longer an execution stake. With the portion buried in the school building as the pivot, a long steel chain extended from there with a massive scythe blade attached to its swinging end—A killing pendulum.

The scythe traced out beautiful curves while swaying. Elsie lowered her body to escape the silently approaching pendulum of death. The giant scythe pendulum measured the unit of time known as intent to kill while sliding slowly. Elsie's rabbit cap was slashed open.

"Do you really think you'll be safe just by bending over? How excessively naive. Of course my mechanism can extend and shorten freely with just a change in chain length. This mechanism's chain was designed to extend according to time to begin with—In other words, this is a form of execution taking delight in the way people watched in terror as the blade gradually approached their head. Also—"

"Ooh! M-My feet...!"

"Mode: «Sargasso Tsunemori». You shouldn't limit your attention to above."

"«Tragic Black River»... Did you really think that Fear-kun and Konoha-kun are the only ones who posed a threat...? Literally dragged down by your feet... Absolutely ridiculous."

Kuroe was supporting herself, pushing with her arms against the ground. Probably rupturing her wound due to forcibly getting up, Kirika was using her right hand to press her half-severed left arm against her shoulder. Elsie's feet were entangled by black hair and the belt, deprived of her freedom. As much as Elsie tried to escape with all her might, it should take her some time.

The killing pendulum swung to its highest point on one end, stopping momentarily, then the scythe was about to return to its original location in accordance with pendulum motion. Towards Elsie ahead on its trajectory, towards Elsie who could not move.

In that instant—

"No, no, no! Elsie... Elsie must complete the mission—! Thus, thus, thus—«Clockwork Life»!"

Elsie neither dodged nor intended to block the swinging pendulum.

Instead, she shot the pocket watch's chain towards Haruaki.

Haruaki had almost lost consciousness from the intense pain and was unable to move, only watching blankly as this scene unfolded. The chain was flying at high speed. The chain whose power could penetrate the school building's concrete. It was flying straight towards Haruaki's face—

However, mere centimeters from his face, the silver chain was deflected simultaneously with a clang. Missing its target, the chain flew past Haruaki's face, stabbing into the ground behind him. That silver chain was definitely fired towards me, Haruaki thought . What happened?

However, he had no time to think further. Fear's killing pendulum was tracing out curves with delightful speed while descending. Konoha was charging like a wild beast, intending to kill Elsie once and twice again.

"Jeez—That scared me! By this point already! But it's over, I won't allow you to beg for mercy or leave any last words. Just go and die!"

At this moment, Haruaki saw in the corner of his eye.

The silver chain, slowly withdrawn from his side—

As though losing all its strength, it plopped down on the ground.

Haruaki's eyes widened with surprise as he opened his mouth to yell:

"Time's up! We won! So—Don't kill her! Fear, Konoha—!"

However, the life-taking pendulum did not stop moving.

Part 12

"Heave-ho... Heave-ho... Wait, I still need to wrap more. Even if it means going bald, I need to wrap more."

"Kuroe, you don't need to push yourself that far. This uses life force, right? You don't look too well in the face."

"You look even worse, Haru."

Kuroe had plucked many strands of her hair and wrapped them around the wound on his arm after applying healing power to them. Haruaki felt the warmth from his dressing while surveying the surroundings. First, he saw Amanda with her blank expression. The direct hazard intending to kill her was already gone. For that, he felt happy from the bottom of his heart, although indirect hazards still lingered.

The silver-haired girl was standing next to Amanda. Watching her, Haruaki said:

"Fear... Thank you."

"Yeah. That was so close. Seriously... So close..."

Fear showed a dazed face while answering. No matter what other emotions she was feeling, surely one of them must be relief. Relief for not having to kill someone. That alone was salvation. She was not going to turn back into her former self.

"Konoha, thank you too... Are you okay? You don't look very good... Oh, sorry."

With her back facing him, Konoha was crouching down where her clothes had fallen. However, she did not reach out to pick up her clothes. Instead, she simply had her head bowed and looked

like she was adjusting her breathing. In other words, she was still completely nude and Haruaki could see her backside. Was the Immorality Blocker going to come flying again? Hence, Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away.

"No—You're... right. After all, having seen so much blood, I'm feeling quite unwell. Please wait... Give me a little time. Until I return to my usual self—Please give me... a little more time... than usual..."

Konoha continued to keep her head bowed while murmuring softly. Then slowly, she picked up her clothes. She seemed a bit strange, but perhaps that could not be helped. Elsie really was very formidable.

Right now, Elsie was lying collapsed on the ground, having lost all strength. Although she was still conscious, she simply stared out into space without reacting at all.

Back then, instead of a knife hand strike, Konoha had used the bottom of her palm to push Elsie's upper torso backwards. On the other hand, Fear had instantly adjusted the length of the pendulous execution scythe. As a result, the killing pendulum had simply sliced open the surface of «Clockwork Life» that was hanging before Elsie's chest, then sliding past.

Probably deciding that they should not lower their guard even after the powerful cursed tool was gone, Kirika used the «Tragic Black River» to tie Elsie up securely. Then pressing down on the squirming wound of the left shoulder while it healed, Kirika turned her gaze viciously—

And glared at the final enemy.

"Himura...!"

"Hahaha, how strange. This is really too strange. Zero marks. To think I calculated so precisely beforehand."

Shoulders trembling, Himura held his mask under his arm and watched the ending as a spectator.

"You people actually defeated Hinai Elsie? That's truly beyond my calculations. An unknown, both pleasing and displeasing... Haha!"

Unbelievable. Haruaki had no idea what exactly happened, but the only thing he could understand was—He... They had been deceived. Despite Himura's sincere-looking behavior, he was actually scheming something in secret—

Haruaki originally thought that Kirika did not need to be that wary of Himura. He had always thought that perhaps Himura was not as bad a person as she believed.

But now he understood. He was completely wrong. It was the opposite.

Kirika's wariness of Himura was only natural.

Perhaps, they should have been even more wary instead—!

"What did you do? Answer me now. Why is Hinai Elsie following your orders!?"

"She called you lord just now, right? What relation do you have with the Knights Dominion?"

Kirika continued to glare at him while Fear cautiously held the Rubik's cube.

Faced with the two girls' interrogation, Himura shrugged nonchalantly.

"I am the Knights Dominion's Lord? *Impossible, wouldn't you say?*"

"Then why—!?"

"This is the result of using this Wathe. Namely, «Article 15»."

Himura lightly waved the object in his hand that looked like a photo frame. However, it was instantly broken into top and bottom halves. Because Fear had thrown the torture wheel directly to break it without warning.

Fear pulled back the wheel using the chain of cubes and spoke quietly with a stern gaze:

"I don't know what kind of ability that cursed tool possesses, but if a man like you can wave it around and show off smugly... It's definitely nothing good. I'll break it first and ask questions later."

"Oh dear, what's with the murderous hostility? I don't have the power to fight you people directly, you know? However, Fear-in-Cube, you really are too impetuous—You should have heard about this thing's existence already. Indeed, *this is precisely the Wathe capable of restoring Amanda Carlot's mind.*"

"What did you say...!?"

Himura waved the bottom portion of the broken frame and shrugged helplessly.

"But to be frank, my explanation only deserves fifty marks. That's because it's actually just a possibility that it could be used that way. Regarding this «Article 15»—Here comes the full marks answer. In other words, *it is a Wathe for brainwashing and controlling people's minds.*"

Haruaki's group was rendered speechless. This was such an astounding ability, more horrifying than any type of sharp blade. Did that small photo frame really possess such an ability?

"This is a tool that was once used by the army of a certain dictatorship state. It was said that soldiers would capture those suspected of treason. Then while beaten and tortured, the prisoners would be presented with a photo-less frame and told: 'Hurry and admit your guilt. The evidence of your treasonous intent is in this photograph here. Irrefutable proof.' Of course, the prisoners all refused to admit in the beginning, but in the end, unable to withstand the torture and beating, finally amidst pain, bewilderment, madness and cursing—They still admitted to their

crimes despite their innocence. In other words, because of this nonexistent photo, the past and memories sought by the soldiers became irrefutable evidence. Then the soldiers declared—"In accordance to Article 15 of the Criminal Code, this man shall be executed for treason."

"A tool for framing innocents in order to kill those who pose a threat to the state... How truly contemptible."

Probably calmed down already, Konoha had finally put on her clothes and glared at Himura while murmuring.

"But it's extremely useful. Then this thing became cursed, turning into a tool that possessed the ability to control the target's mind just by presenting it before their eyes. But Wathes with powerful cursed abilities always come with certain restrictions. This is no exception. In order to invoke the mind-control ability on a certain person, two conditions must be met. First of all, energy must be gathered—similar to «Clockwork Life»'s time, which can be said to be completely complementary to «Article 15»'s curse."

"I don't really get it, but anyway, it can't be any good curse."

"In terms of control, that's true indeed. Yachi Haruaki and Kirika should know already, this type of Wathe not only affects the owner but also spreads its curse indiscriminately to the surrounding people. Namely, *it forcibly pulls out people's inner thoughts. Whether delusions, past memories or simply nightmares, that depends on the situation.* Have any of you experienced particularly realistic dreams or daydreams recently?"

"Nuu! Could... that be why...!?"

Fear frowned as though realizing something. Konoha and Kirika did the same. Kuroe was focused on healing Haruaki so he did not know if she was recalling something as well. However, even Haruaki himself remembered a few things. Delusions that were not supposed to happen. Delusions appearing realistically like daydreams.

Not only that. Haruaki recalled what everyone was chatting about before going to take their showers. Fear and Konoha had mentioned frequent nightmares lately. They had thought it was just by chance due to excessive exhaustion. However, was all this due to the effects of the Wathe in Himura's possession?"

"Looks like you all have an idea. Because I've been hiding and observing you people a number of times, the phenomenon happens even if you don't see me. How delightful it was to watch your reactions when you suddenly returned to your senses."

"You bastard...! By now, so it turns out... it turns out that I saw those things... It's all your fault!?"

"Stop glaring at me, Fear-in-Cube. Even I was forced to personally rewatch many of my own painful memories. In any case, this is the necessary 'fuel' required for activating this Wathe's brainwashing ability. Namely, to gather the surrounding people's imaginations, memories and fragments of their feelings."

"So you... also used that ability to control the mind of this enemy, Hinai Elsie."

Konoha spoke, prompting Himura to look up as though recalling something.

"Yes. That's essentially correct. But the one using «Article 15» at the time was not actually me but those guys at the Knights Dominion. In other words, it wasn't me."

"W-What do you mean by that...?"

"Yachi Haruaki, what are good student you are for believing the teacher's words. But it's necessary to doubt sometimes. You were all mistaken from the start. Muramasa said once: 'Despite being a member of the Knights Dominion, she was able to converse normally.' What a shame, no one followed up on that observation, although I covered it up at the time by claiming it was the result of the mind-healing Wathe. *Simply stated, this girl was not one of the Dominion's knights to begin with. Originally, she was—*"

Part 13

Hinai Elsie was having a dream, simply having a dream.

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. The clock sounds from her headphones continued nonstop.

These sounds were mixed together with the clock sounds she heard in the cellar back then.

After being abducted together with her father, she was taken to that cellar. The insane clockmaker outside the door had said. Kill each other. If one of you succeeds, the survivor shall go free. Once

the time limit is reached, I will release poison gas to kill you both.
Don't forget, time is life.

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.

Her father was looking all around, at a loss what to do. Roaring angrily, he hammered the sturdy door of iron, screaming open the door now open the door now.

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.

However, Elsie experienced the feeling while listening to the sounds of the pocket watch that measured out the time of life.

A feeling completely different from her father's—She experienced... joy.

This moment...

Finally...

It came!

Can't be helped can't be helped finally saved I can escape now. After all, under such circumstances, it could not be helped, she was not going to be punished, wonderful wonderful wonderful wonderful so happy so happy so happy so happy great!

Hence, by the 22nd second, Elsie had already decided what she needed to do. Seeing the back of her father's head while he was struggling and hammering the iron door in vain, she discovered a problem by the 24th second. She was a child while her father was

an adult. By the 35th second, she recalled the hint. By the 42nd second, she found the answer. Picking up the pocket watch's silver chain in the 43rd second, she choked her father's neck with the silver chain in the 44th second.

Die! Die! Die die die! Doing those dirty things in the toilet, in the bathroom, on the bed, every day and every night, saying because mother was no longer around, doing as he pleased, those painful, disgusting and uncomfortable things, only caring for his own pleasure, no matter how many many times she said no no no, so go die go die go die go die!

The 50th second—55th second—1 minute—2 minutes—

Since she was still a child, lacking in strength, it took her a great deal of effort.

Even so, her father still died when 3 minutes and 57 seconds arrived.

The iron door opened and the insane clockmaker ran over in jubilation, repeating nonstop: Awesome! Finally, someone who understands my beliefs has appeared. Time is life, you understand that as well, right? Awesome!

She was not listening at all.

She was simply—Towards the clock that had saved her from those hellish days of her cursed life, giving her that power, the object that she felt was no simple pocket watch the instant she picked it up, she offered her utmost gratitude and love.

Thank you for helping me.

Thank you for saving me.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. I must repay this favor.
That's great, after all, I was thinking whether I should simply go
right now.

So, I will keep loving you.

Henceforth, *I will keep loving you, forever and ever—*

Eh? But what happened after that?

Why did I swear allegiance to my most beloved Dominion Lord
?

How odd. I can't remember. I really can't remember—

Part 14

"—Originally, *she was a member of the Bivorio Family.*"

Hearing the unexpected name, Haruaki stared wide-eyed. What
was going on? Why did that name pop up now? She... Were they
not already—

Himura cackled with laughter.

"This is my second time using them. Ah, you're trying to ask: Aren't they disbanded already? In terms of the organization, yes, they are disbanded definitely, but that doesn't mean there are no survivors. Back when they declared war on the Lab Chief's Nation, Hinai Elsie, whose powers from «Clockwork Life» made her a mainstay of the Family's combat strength, was permitted to fight using her powers as usual, exempted from suicide bombing. Then in accordance with her title of «Four Minutes», the Tiny Extermination Zone, she annihilated a branch lab's forces before escaping, quite different from Oratorie Rabdulmunagh who was captured after exhausting herself. Hinai Elsie probably intended to attack other branches with guerrilla tactics after storing up time. But due to her formidable powers, Hinai Elsie was also targeted by the Knights Dominion. While she was still accumulating time, she was captured by several of the Dominion's knights who had appeared on orders."

Himura waved the broken «Article 15» in his hand again.

"Then this made a reappearance. Soon after capturing Hinai Elsie, the Knights Dominion also got hold of this tool. Using a brainwashing Wathe has always been a matter on their minds for a long time now. Due to losing various knights one after another, such as the «Balancing Toy» or «Isolate», the one-man force who used to control Indigo Venom, in order to replenish their forces, they decided to use this girl, Hinai Elsie, as an experimental subject for the Wathe they had just obtained."

"They brainwashed her and made her a knight because she possessed power putting her on the level of the «Strongest»... So

that's what happened? Indeed, that would bolster their forces substantially."

"Even if she went mad and died due to their incomplete understanding of «Article 15», it did not matter since she was originally an enemy in the first place. After that, the Lab Chief happened to assign me a new mission just as I was discharged from the hospital. Namely, to use «Il est dans Bastille» to secretly observe the Knights Dominion. Coincidentally, when I arrived there, they were just about to use «Article 15» to brainwash Hinai Elsie, having just refilled its energy. What I did next was very simple. Once they told her 'You are a knight from the Knights Dominion,' all I had to do was hide myself and approach Elsie Hinai, whispering in her ear: 'Then henceforth, you shall follow my orders with absolute obedience. I am the Dominion Lord.'"

Himura proceeded to explain what happened after that. Using his mask that erased his sense of presence, he found an opportunity to release Hinai Elsie's restraints. Then he stole the «Clockwork Life» that the Knights Dominion had taken and returned it to her. Then issuing orders as the Dominion Lord, he had her go on a brief but destructive rampage, allowing «Article 15» to fall into his hands—

"What the heck... What the heck are you trying to do!? I can't believe you went that far...!"

"As long as I got my hands on this Wathe, I would be able to obtain what I desired. That was my only wish."

"Haha..." Suddenly, someone laughed. Not Himura. Eyes flashing with intense flames of wrath, laughing sardonically with no mirth in her eyes, Kirika.

"Absolutely ridiculous... How absolutely ridiculous! You bastard, I knew it—!"

"Although I've said it who knows how many times already, allow me to repeat once again. Kirika, I love you."

Hearing these words, Haruaki felt surprise in his heart. But incredibly, at the same time, Haruaki understood something calmly. These feelings of Himura's were precisely part of Kirika's reasons for hating him. Furthermore, judging from the intense revulsion Kirika expressed towards Himura to date, these feelings were surely not reciprocated... Indeed, his insane love for Kirika was undoubtedly one-sided.

Even as fellow members of the same gender, Fear and the girls could tell that Kirika's will contained nothing but rejection.

"In other words, you did it to obtain Kirika's heart? Don't make me laugh. Even though I don't quite understand romance, it's 100% clear that Kirika doesn't feel that way about you."

"Immoral relationships between teachers and students ought to exist only fictionally in television dramas or novels. That said... I still can't understand. Why did you entrust Amanda-san to us and have Hinai Elsie attack her? Was there really a need to go through this entire process?"

"Of course it was necessary. It just happened that Amanda was a suitable part of the plan. I forgot to mention that «Article 15» needs one more condition to activate, namely, 'It cannot produce an effect unless the target is in a state of extreme shock.' When the Knights Dominion was brainwashing Elsie, they created the state of shock by telling her that the Family was disbanded. Energy is gathered by the Wathe automatically drawing out fragments of thoughts and feelings from the surrounding people, but this requirement of a shocked state must be prepared personally."

"Hmph... I get it now. You were simply pretending to put in sincere effort to save Amanda."

"Presumably to improve Ueno-san's impression of you. How inane. From appearance, you wound... Although it looks very severe but it actually avoided vitals with great precision. You must have told that brainwashed girl that you'll rush forward to protect Ueno-san and to pierce your body while avoiding vitals when the time came—Something like that."

"Basically. Regrettably, despite me doing so much—You still were not shocked from seeing me suffer a critical wound. What a shame. I never expected Fear-in-Cube's orders for me to put on the mask and stand aside to become the reason for my failure... No matter what, I did suffer a severe injury to protect you. I really hoped that you would honestly suffer a shock. Clearly you used to call me 'Senpai' all the time and admired me so much. How heartbreaking."

"Absolutely ridiculous... No matter how sincere your behavior appeared, I already know your true nature! As if anyone would be shocked! You have not changed one bit at all!"

"No... I'm no longer the same. Just as I told you, I 'have decided to change'... So I chose to use the backup plan. If Yachi Haruaki died, you will surely be shocked."

"! —Shut up!"

"There were a number of reasons why I didn't do that from the start. Because when the time comes, Fear-in-Cube and Muramasa would likely muster formidable power without regard for themselves, then I would have no choice but to openly break through their encirclement, too high a risk... I was thinking time might run out at most, but never thought you people would actually succeed in defeating Hinai Elsie. The second reason is simply a matter of feeling. It's not bad to make Kirika mine upon Yachi Haruaki's death, but after all, Yachi has been hindering me constantly all this time. Ultimately, it would be much more satisfying if I could let him personally witness Kirika becoming my possession—"

"Shut up——!"

Kirika's furious shout entered Haruaki's ears. What on earth was Himura talking about? There was too much information and he could not comprehend it all at once. After pondering a little longer, it seemed more understandable. Uh... That... In other words—

"Haru, Haru, are you alright? How does your wound feel?"

Almost pressing tightly against him, Kuroe asked while continuing to treat his arm. This question interrupted his thoughts, causing the answer to slip far away instantly.

"Ah... Hmm, it still hurts a bit. Anyway, since it can't be cured instantly, there's no need to force it."

"Really? Then I'll just wrap a little bit more. Don't tense your mind too much and try not to think about other things. Just relax a bit."

Kuroe wrapped new hair around his around. After dressing the wound, a sense of warmth slowly seeped through. Kuroe seemed to be muttering something incomprehensible, such as: "That's quite unfair, for this to be revealed by someone else's mouth..."

"In any case, your plan already failed. That brainwashing tool is also destroyed. Besides, your leader has already promised not to make a move on us. Your actions have contravened his orders... We should have the right to demand compensation at least. More concretely, that's the right to beat you up here."

"Haha—Here comes the third reason. It's not only you, but the Lab Chief also warned me not to make a move on Yachi Haruaki. After all, the Lab Chief's Nation offers many conveniences as an organization. Adhering to their stance would require me to avoid attacking Yachi Haruaki directly as much as possible. But it can't be helped. In other words, I have resolved myself to 'change,' Kirika."

"...*You intend... to leave the Lab Chief's Nation?*"

Kirika asked quietly. Himura nodded lightly.

"You are my only happiness. Only by obtaining you will I gain happiness. I won't give up."

Himura tossed «Article 15»'s remains onto the ground and picked up the bizarre mask from under his arm instead.

Fear frowned and readied herself to throw the torture wheel while saying:

"What happiness? Hmm, it's not like I understand matters of romance between the genders but as a love expert, Sovereignty told me many things, so I can at least understand that feeling a little. Be that as it may, I still have to say this... Your way of going about it is totally wrong. That's the only thing I am absolutely certain of. You are truly underhanded and despicable. Surely, what's known as love requires people to convey their thoughts and feelings with sincerity, transmitting their pure and precious feelings to the other person, with the determination to accept the possibility of failing and getting hurt, yet in spite of that, still telling the other person face to face—Like a battle where you gamble your entire existence. However, you cowardly gave up on the battle, instead turning to seek the power of a tool carrying an ugly curse. *You did not even try to fight. There is nothing more shameful and unsightly than this kind of love where you've given up on fighting from the start!*"

The instant Fear's speech resounded through the air, Kirika's eyes flashed with surprise for some reason. At the same time, Kuroe slightly tightened her hair around Haruaki's wound. It really did hurt... a little.

After listening to Fear's words, Himura's lips curled up.

"I don't care. That's how I fight."

Without any hurry, he raised his arm. Seeing that, Kirika shook her head while looking up, still staying in the same spot all this time. For just an instant, she bit her lip in hesitation, then—

"Absolutely ridiculous... Although I'm not obliged to tell you this, I'll still say it. Your curse is already reaching a limit. If you continue to use «Il est dans Bastille», you will lose all sense of presence, even when you're not wearing the mask. Even to the point of forgetting your own existence. This condition, equivalent to death, could very well happen the next time you wear it. So—"

She gulped and spoke curtly:

"Stop now—Don't wear it again. You will die."

However, Himura did not stop his motion.

Smiling in response to Kirika's words, he muttered at the same time:

"Such a direct gaze, how nostalgic. From the moment when I first saw those eyes of yours, I already—"

Then he prepared to put on the mask.

"Don't think... I'll let you...!"

Fear spun herself and was about to throw the torture wheel. Konoha took a step forward. Kirika extended the «Tragic Black River». However, Himura knew very well how to stop them.

"Oh—I forgot to mention. Even if «Article 15» itself is broken, the brainwashing remains. So allow me to dispose of a useless pawn. Hinai Elsie."

"Yes."

Lying on the ground, spacing out, Elsie responded. Himura continued speaking briefly:

"I order you to die."

"Yes."

Smiling happily with satisfaction, Elsie bit her own tongue. Instantly, her mouth overflowed with fresh blood while her body trembled and convulsed like a fish.

"Wha—! You bastard—!"

Just as Fear and the others' attention was drawn to Elsie, Himura quickly put «Il est dans Bastille» over his head.

"Then I shall take my leave. After all, starting a while ago, there are other people secretly observing us. Voyeurism is my specialty, you know. Well then, what should I do next? For the sake of obtaining my happiness, what should I do... How delightful, hahaha, things are getting more and more delightful! Don't forget, Kirika, I am watching you, any time, any place! Always watching you intently!"

Leaving these last words behind—

Himura vanished.

Was he going to reappear again?—No one knew.

Part 15

"Guh!" Fear groaned briefly and dangled the torture wheel by her side. Watching blood spill out of Elsie's mouth, she lowered her face sadly. However, she immediately looked up again, neither running towards Elsie, nor running towards Haruaki, nor turning her torture tool back to the Rubik's cube.

"...Cow Tits."

"I've sensed them too. This goes without saying."

The two of them were staring at the same direction. Haruaki was puzzled by their attitudes.

"W-What's going on?"

"Hmph. Starting a while ago, some people have been peeping at us. Although I only noticed the presence just now... According to the pocket watch's time, it felt like it was at 3 minutes and 58 seconds."

"I left them alone because there was no time to bother with them, but it's truly uncomfortable, being watched by someone silently. How much longer do you intend to hide for? Don't worry, we must express our thanks first. But after that, I don't know."

Soon after Fear and Konoha spoke, the bushes before their eyes rustled and shook. Then out emerged three people, one familiar to them while two were strangers.

"My statement: basically I'll still answer. We do not intend to hide the whole time. It was time to come out, reporting this kind of report."

"Un Izoey...? Why are you here? And those others are...?"

Standing before them was a dark-skinned girl. Instead of the navel-exposing uniform she wore in school, she was dressed in a lab coat with a long tribal skirt, attire that represented her identity as part of the Lab Chief's Nation.

The other two also seemed to be members of the Lab Chief's Nation.

One was a very skinny woman, dressed in a simple tight skirt and lab coat, her long hair fluttering in the night wind, her eyes half-closed sleepily. She was probably not actually sleepy but her eyes simply looked that way to begin with. In contrast, the other person was a burly man resembling a bear. His facial features looked very simple yet very deep set at the same time. He was dressed in a shirt, a tie, dress pants, and like the others, a lab coat. No matter how one looked at it, that lab coat seemed to be too tight a fit. The front buttons were probably impossible to fasten.

The woman made a strange laugh while introducing herself quietly.

"Kususu... Nice to meet you, hello everyone. I am Shinohogi Rai , the Chief of the Second Branch from the Lab Chief's Nation. Because Lab Chief Yamimagari is very busy, I came as his representative. Let's get along well from now on... Kususu?"

"I am Takasugi Seijuurou the Deputy Branch Chief! We have no intention of making you our enemies, so please don't be so on guard."

"I remember you saying: 'Damn it, I hate doing this kind of pain in the ass job the most. Damn Lab Chief, tonight I just rented an adult video featuring someone resembling the Branch Chief and was planning to enjoy myself fully...' Isn't that right? Kususu, Takasugi-kun, that's not good. I've got to jot this down..."

"Please stop imitating my voice and writing fabricated news into your 'informant reports for Lab Chief Yamimagari' notebook!"

Clearly, Branch Chief, you're the one who was complaining just now: 'Going out at night is bad for the skin.'... Oh, it's coming! The backhanded punch~!"

"Please don't say things that'll give others the wrong impression . These are the Lab Chief's orders, so I'll have you know that I rushed here, skipping along with enthusiasm. Yes, after all, I do want to see the Yachi Haruaki-kun of rumor... Yes... Hmmm..."

Without looking at the man who was holding his nose—Takasugi—the woman stared intently at Haruaki as claimed . Then she suddenly reached into her inside coat pocket to get something. Fear and the girls frantically prepared to attack, but—

"Umm... Branch Chief, why are you suddenly popping bubble wrap?"

"Kususu... I was expecting the boy, with the special constitution of being immune to curses, to be a handsome youth with a muscular body like a gorilla's in accordance with having a special constitution... My hopes are dashed, I'm so heartbroken. Sigh... Where on earth can I find a man of my preference, capable of slaking my thirst...?"

She sighed while popping bubble wrap. Meanwhile, Takasugi stood behind her as though saying "Right here! Right here!", silently pointing repeatedly at his own face. Fear half-narrowed her eyes.

"...Are these guys comedians? How sudden and incomprehensible."

"I explain by giving the explanation that they are basically from the Lab Chief's Nation."

Un Izoey spoke seriously and did not look like she was lying. Rai threw the piece of bubble wrap away as though tired of it.

"Kususu... Hmm, this does feel out of the blue. As for why we're here... I think you guys already understand the situation. That's because researcher Himura Sunao was acting too suspiciously."

"Should this be called surveillance or observation? The whole thing began when he took away that Amanda Carlot from our medical facility."

"...She wasn't discharged from hospital?"

Kirika asked while staring cautiously at the two of them. Rai laughed again.

"Kususu, Your Highness the Princess, it's been a while. You don't intend to return?"

"That conversation is already over. Hurry and answer me."

"Yes yes. Although Amanda has recovered a lot, she still hasn't reached the point where she can be discharged. We originally thought it was the Knights Dominion's doing, but this child is probably no longer important to them... Just as we were racking our brains in puzzlement, oh dear, what a surprise. In one of the

usual reports sent by our excellent researcher, unbelievably there was a mention of Fear-in-Cube pushing someone on a wheelchair in school, a white-haired girl who looked a bit strange."

Un Izoey kept nodding. Speaking of which, when taking Amanda on a tour of the school, they had encountered her back then. The job of reporting precisely on Fear and the others' situation in school, Kirika's responsibility in the past, was now handed over to Un Izoey.

"Of the personnel related to this school, there is a researcher Himura who possesses a Wathe capable of erasing one's sense of presence. Due to a number of suspicious points when he was sent on reconnaissance missions to the Knights Dominion, the Lab Chief ordered us to investigate him—"

"In other words, after some investigation, the situation evolved to the current state. Does everyone understand? Although we failed to catch him, that can't be helped. Now that the whole story is cleared up, our job is done once we report back to the Lab Chief.. . Anyway, we are very sorry that one of our colleagues caused so much trouble for everyone."

"Not just any trouble, it was totally massive trouble. Like I said just now, I even want to demand compensation."

Fear pouted and spoke. Rai shrugged lightly.

"Kususu... Of course, the Lab Chief also ordered us to do you a favor if there's any way we could help. According to our sources, the Knights Dominion has installed an Indulgence Disk into «

Article 15». As much as I'd like to take it for research, since it's the Lab Chief's orders, you guys can have it as a gift... Also, there's... Ah yes. Anyway, leave Hinai Elsie to us to take care of as well. Takasugi-kun, how's her condition?"

"Uh... Oh? I think she can be saved if rushed to the hospital at once, or perhaps not!"

"Kususu, unlike what's shown in movies, biting through your tongue doesn't actually kill you that easily in real life. Dealing with a corpse or reviving her, which would be more of a pain? Oh well, whatever, hurry and send her to the hospital."

"Understood! Then I shall take my leave first!"

Saying that, Takasugi picked up Elsie in his muscular arms and sped off from the scene as quickly as he could. Although she was an enemy, she was simply a member of the Family, manipulated by Himura. If she could be saved, that would be for the best, of course.

"Next, how do you guys intend to handle Amanda Carlot? You can return her to our hospital if you like, but letting you keep her is fine as well... Oh my?"

For some reason, Rai had her head cocked in puzzlement while looking at Amanda whose unfocused eyes were directed towards the night sky. Fear bowed her head to look at the remains of « Article 15» that Himura had left behind.

"A tool for controlling minds. Perhaps Amanda's mind could be recovered using this. But no, this is a cursed tool after all, so it shouldn't be used. But—What does Amanda think herself? What I did... is it really... the right thing..."

"Fear..."

What should he say to her? Haruaki did not know. Fear's doubts were shared by him at the same time. Was this okay? Was this... honestly okay?

Nevertheless, at this moment, Rai examined Amanda and went "Kususu, please allow me to interrupt for a bit."

"Oh, I see now. In that case, it doesn't matter if that thing's broken."

"D-Don't talk so lightly! This girl... But she's still in this kind of state—"

"Speaking of which, the report did mention about this as well. You are really amazing for noticing the issue without any prior information."

"My honor: to receive your praise is my honor."

Un Izoey was nodding at something while turning her head to look at Haruaki's group.

"Kususu... According to the hospital's records, the girl had indeed lost all cognition in the beginning, but recently, she had already recovered to the point of being able to speak."

"Wha—!/? Then why did she become like this now! So her condition deteriorated again!?"

"Indeed, how odd, right? Deteriorating to this extent, it does make one wonder if someone deliberately played a hand in this. Well then, allow me to ask a question. Have you guys been giving her some kind of medicine? Kususu."

Kirika stared in wide-eyed shock as she took out a sheet of tablets from her pocket. This was the medicine that Himura had given to Kirika to feed Amanda regularly.

"How absolutely ridiculous. Of course, I did examine it myself, because medicine coming from him cannot be trusted at all. However, this really is a drug for treating mental illnesses—"

"Hmm. May I have some of that medicine?"

Kirika handed the sheet of tablets hesitantly. Rai scrutinized it for a while then said:

"There's nothing suspicious about the packaging or the labeling. .. However—"

Then taking out a tablet, she placed it on her tongue without deliberation. Moving her jaw and chewing for a while, she then spat the tablet out—

"Kususu, bingo. The contents here don't match. I'm actually very skilled at distinguishing drugs by taste. Even if certain drugs have no taste, there's a kind of feeling... Anyway, he probably hired someone to forge the packaging and stuff. Simply stated, *this drug causes people to lose their sanity if taken for prolonged durations*. From researcher Himura's perspective, he needed this child for his goal but could not allow her to say anything wrong that would jeopardize his plans... Looks like he really wanted her to be nothing more than a tool to highlight how hard he was working."

"W-What did you say...!? Then—!"

"As long as she stops taking this drug and continues to receive the treatment she was supposed to receive, she should recover normally."

Rai answered simply. Un Izoey also spoke up with calm eyes:

"My statement: I think I mentioned before, should start by checking food. In my homeland, there are people who accidentally ate poisonous herbs repeatedly, blocking the flow of their *raama*, then losing their minds like this."

Impossible. Was this really true?

If that were the case... Ahhh... If that were the case—Amanda was going to recover.

Haruaki looked her, sitting on the wheelchair. She was expressionless. However, she should be able to recover. She should

recover as soon as possible the expressions she was supposed to have. Also, this should be performed by those who know how to treat her.

Then the members of Haruaki's group looked at one another.

"In the end... I guess this is what's called leaving it to the professionals. Although I'm still a bit worried."

"Yes, if you guys will promise us, you won't use this girl for inhumane experiments or torturing her for information—"

"Upon the honor of my tribe, I promise this kind of promise."

"Kususu, after all, she doesn't know any information that we have no choice to get except through torture."

Although the woman laughing eerily could not be trusted, Haruaki thought that he could probably believe Un Izoey, who was nodding with sincere eyes. At least, she was not a bad person.

Kirika also seemed to hesitate for a long time. Finally, she made an agonizing decision. Glaring, she said:

"...I still cannot trust you people at all. Allow us to see her whenever we ask to see her. That is the condition."

"Kususu, that means we'll need to behave then. Understood, Your Highness the Princess. Researcher Un Izoey here shall serve as the point of contact, is that okay?"

Amanda was going to be returned to the medical facility affiliated with the Lab Chief's Nation. Staring at Amanda's face, Fear bid her farewell for now.

"Take care... You must accept your treatment properly. Also, see you next time. Honestly, I don't know what I'll chat with you the next time we meet. We are still ourselves and you are a former enemy. So I don't know if I need to apologize to you or not. However, let's meet again in order to confirm this matter. I will neither run nor hide."

These words spoke for everyone in the group.

Hence, no further words were needed. Haruaki simply reached out and lightly stroked the soft strands of Amanda's hair, bidding farewell to this sensation as well for now.

Un Izoey pushed the wheelchair and departed together with Rai.

Watching the backs of their lab coats, Haruaki suddenly remembered. Konoha had said: we must express our thanks first. If what Konoha said was true, then just now, it really was—

"Oh, hey! Umm... Could it be that you just saved me? When Elsie was extending the silver chain towards me, the chain seemed to be deflected by an arrow or something, inexplicably changing direction—"

"—What are you talking about? I answer with this kind of answer. From the bottom of my heart, I have no clue at all."

Un Izoey answered without looking back. An obvious lie.

On the other hand, Rai grinned and looked back:

"Kususu... This child said this: 'Clearly a formidable foe has appeared, why aren't they asking me for help? What an unknown.' Probably because they don't want to owe us a favor, so you shouldn't make a move—That's what I explained to her... But she apparently couldn't stop her body from acting on its own. Had we arrived on scene a little earlier, she probably would have rushed into the fray happily? Kususu, towards you guys, this child really feels—Oh dear, why are suddenly walking so fast? If you leave me behind, I'll cry."

As though aching to leave the scene as quickly as possible, Un Izoey was pushing the wheelchair rapidly. Rai giggled with laughter while her shoulders shook, following after her. Amanda's white hair was swaying left and right on the wheelchair.

After the trio vanished, the school at night finally returned to silence.

Haruaki could not help but look up at the school building behind him. The concrete wall, shattered by Elsie's silver chain; the external wall, cracked by Fear's torture tool—as well as the large broken clock.

The clock was currently stopped.

However, time itself had not stopped.

Looking at that damaged clock, Haruaki realized once again.

A matter-of-fact, precious and lovable feeling, yet at the same time, slightly worrying.

Just like this malfunctioning clock.

Simply invisible.

Simply impossible to confirm, but time itself was definitely flowing continuously.

And then, something else was changing continuously as well.

Epilogue

Part 1

What are your plans from here on? She asked.

—I can't go back anymore. The other person answered.

Why did you join them? She asked.

—No particular reason, I just went with the flow. The other person answered.

Apart from that place, do you have any other place you belong to? She asked.

—Nowhere. The other person answered.

Then after a period of silence... Do you still remember what happened so far? She asked.

—I have listened all along. The other person answered.

At the same time, the other person turned to look at the ordinary scene outside the window—bearing a smile.

Watching that kind of expression, she thought to herself.

The past could not be changed. Time could neither be stopped nor reversed.

Even so, one must believe that "the present" could be changed, then continue advancing forward. She believed that humans need this kind of resilience. After getting to know those girls who were closer to human than anyone else despite not being human, if this person was able to smile like this while reminiscing about them, then there was all the more reason for this person to apply this sort of resilience and move forward courageously.

Hence, she—Un Izoey—asked once again.

"Without any place you belong, going back will mean your elimination. I hereby ask you... Do you wish to work?"

—I am an enemy. The other person answered.

"I believe what you said about going with the flow. Since there is no reason to put effort in staying there, neither is it possible to return to that place, there should be no problem."

—Even so, aren't you worried I will betray your organization? The other person answered.

"My reply: not worried. The pain of betraying and the pain of being betrayed are both known to you. Besides, without any place where you belong, there is no benefit in betraying us either."

Silence.

Un Izoey gave the other person time to consider as well as supplementary information.

"Let me state beforehand, the work is simple. Due to one of our members disappearing, you will be replacing the position, something like a contracted employee. But if you agree with our ideology and want to pursue the unknown, that's a different matter. Are you interested in the belief of unraveling the unknown ? I ask this kind of question."

—No idea. What I want to know is what I'm supposed to do next. The other person answered.

"A remarkable unknown. Do you have any idea?"

Next, Un Izoey remained silent, waiting for the other person's conclusion.

In this white sickroom, in this sickroom that contained only two people, Un Izoey was waiting for the answer from the young girl who was sitting up in bed, staring out the slightly ajar window.

After a moment, she spoke:

"I have... a condition."

"What condition?"

"That person. I wish to... see that person."

It was obvious who that person she was referring to. A knight in isolation who had been captured. The person who once wanted to kill this very girl.

"I won't do anything. I just want to see her. Neither have I thought of helping her escape. She will surely be eliminated if she returns to the Knights Dominion. Staying here... is safer."

"If she sees you, she will condemn you a traitor. She will want to kill you again. In spite of that?"

"In spite of that."

She answered immediately, then continued in a whispering voice:

"Even if it's a lie, even on a whim, my memories won't disappear, the past won't disappear. I did feel happiness for real. Hence, I want to tell her. I just... want to tell her this..."

Her gaze was still directed outside the slightly ajar window.

"Thank you for giving me memories. Also—"

Wind blew in from the window, gently caressing the girl's white hair.

Like an intangible mother.

"—Goodbye."

Part 2

On that day, early in the morning before the sun had risen completely, Konoha tiptoed her way across the corridor in the Yachi residence. Stepping cautiously, she finally reached her destination—in front of the door to *his* room.

Gingerly, she looked all around and took a deep breath. Then with a forceful nod that went "yes!", she slid open the paper door. Even though she did so with great gusto, Konoha still carefully paid attention to the sound when opening and closing the paper door.

This was his room. For a room belonging to a teenaged boy, this could be considered quite neat and tidy. The same sight as usual, yet carrying a different atmosphere from normal—His room. Lying in the futon laid out in the center of the room, he was giving off steady breathing noises. In this tiny room, there was only herself and the sounds of his breathing. This was a sight that made her feel very comfortable and happy.

Konoha gently knelt down by the futon to observe his sleeping face. So cute.

An impulse surged from the depths of her heart, almost driving her mad.

Surging from the heart of her, the one who was lying.

The memories of that day were awakened, accompanied by pain. Ahhh, on that day, she had intentionally lifted the seal of the

lie buried deep inside her, lifted the self-hypnosis that caused her to fear the sight of blood, immobilized whenever she saw blood. Several times in the past during crises, she had surmounted that layer of restraint through momentary force of vigor. However, lifting the restraint itself was the very first time.

It could not be helped. Had she not done so, she would have been unable to protect him. But was it right? Did she do the wrong thing? She did not know.

Right now, she wanted to apply that self-hypnosis on herself again. However, that layer of restraint that had taken effect until now, was a lie that approached truth infinitely, having been carefully crafted and built up over the years, finally reaching completion. So true that even Konoha herself forgot about the fact under normal conditions.

Once lifted, returning to past levels would require spending some time on it. Currently, flaws and openings existed. Currently, her existence was equally dangerous as that cube of torture and execution—

The lie of the past, the lie of the present, should she inform him? To be honest, she was very afraid. At the time, perhaps her mind was not quite stable due to the effects of the mind-controlling tool's curse. Once the chance was lost, she was going to flounder helplessly henceforth.

Konoha reached out to caress his cheek in his sleep. How warm, it invited tender affection.

The depths of her body ached. If she could simply steal his lips like this... If she could simply enter his futon like this, using this body of hers to accept his all... If she could be embraced by these arms of his, to experience his warmth forever and ever—What bliss that would truly be.

Desired. Desired. She... desired him... so much—

Konoha suppressed this impulse while gently tracing the outline of his face.

(Hey, Haruaki-kun... I am actually... this sort of scary woman. A woman who could go mad any time. If... I unreservedly... confess everything to you—Haruaki-kun, how will... you answer me...?)

Just at this moment—

"Mmm... Hmm...?"

He woke up. Konoha withdrew her hand from his face as though nothing had happened and smiled tenderly. Her usual self. Right here was her usual self. She should maintain this always.

"Konoha...?"

"Good morning, Haruaki-kun. Sorry for waking you up."

"Yawn... No, I should be getting up around now, so it's fine. What's up?"

Haruaki sleepily glanced at the clock by his pillow to confirm the time then tapped the top of his alarm clock, sluggishly

switching off the alarm. After he sat up, Konoha lightly presented to him the small box that she had been holding.

"Uh... This isn't anything particularly important... Umm... Today ... isn't it that, you see? So... I just wanted to... give this to you."

"Hmm? Oh... Could this be chocolate...?"

Konoha nodded repeatedly. It was the chocolate she had made by hand personally, secretly made in the kitchen with the lights off in the middle of last night. If someone had happened to get up to go to the washroom, they would probably have witnessed the sight of a suspicious figure stirring a pot like a witch, relying on nothing more than the light from the gas stove's flame. Due to success beyond expectation, she apparently giggled secretly to herself a number of times... Even she found herself quite frightful. Luckily, no one saw her.

Haruaki blinked repeatedly quite a few times, finally scratching his face shyly, he took the box of chocolate.

"Thank you, Konoha. I'm so happy. But why so early in the morning?"

"S-Sorry. Umm... That's... because you will surely receive a lot of chocolate today, Haruaki-kun, so I was thinking I'd like to give it to you earlier than anyone else at least... Umm... Basically something like that..."

She stammered and murmured. Perhaps too quiet for Haruaki to hear, he tilted his head in puzzlement.

It was fine even if he did not catch it. After all, saying it again would be too embarrassing. "Anyway, it was involuntary, involuntary, okay!? Since I wanted to make breakfast today with great gusto, so I made this for you in the process as though to wake you up!" Reflexively, she glossed over things.

"O-Oh okay. Then I'll hurry to get dressed and head over—By the way, I'll say this again. Umm, thank you."

Haruaki lifted up the box of chocolate and spoke. Konoha replied with a smile and left the room. Sliding the paper door shut, she paused without moving for a few seconds. Coming from the room were sounds of him undressing and getting changed.

She had definitely handed the chocolate to him. He was very happy. Chocolate that was handed over earlier than anyone else would definitely be very special.

What needed to be done was done. But by this point, only then did she begin to realize: Would it be better if I was more proactive? Like giving him chocolate in a different manner, surprising him more, to let him know her feelings, then have all sorts of happy things happening. Such as... Such as—

"...Smearing chocolate on my body, then approaching and asking him to eat it... Something like that...?"

She could not help but murmur the image surfacing in her mind. After a second's delay, she was greatly shocked. Truly too indecent. Truly too perverted. What the heck was she thinking!?

Konoha rubbed her reddened cheeks and skipped her way to the kitchen to prepare a happy breakfast with him together.

Part 3

Fear suddenly sat up from the futon and took a huge yawn, then mumbled her lips. While sitting in bed, she turned her head, straightened her back and swiveled her spine left and right. While doing these actions to drive away her sleepiness, she checked out her body's condition.

...Checking out her body's condition.

Fear reached out lightly and stroked her lower abdomen.

It was not long after defeating Hinai Elsie and Himura Sunao had vanished. Taking the Indulgence Disk from «Article 15», Haruaki had personally inserted it with his hand deep inside her as usual, which resulted in sealing away the «Tornado of Souls». She recalled the situation at the time.

"That bastard... I'm getting that feeling that his gentleness is subtly lacking recently. Even if it's because he's inserted the Disks many times into my body now, even if it's because he's used to it... Hmph, he should be more gentle when putting it inside. Because my hole is very small, shoving it in by force hurts a lot..."

She unintentionally grumbled and complained, thinking to herself: I really wish he'd think of some other method. Always holding that thing and shoving, pushing, poking every single time, doing as he pleased... Hmm, but after all, I'm the one who asked

him to insert it in the first place, so I guess I need to endure to some extent. That said, there should be other ways, right? Such as..
. Yes, such as—

"Before putting it in... Lick and moisten my hole first... something like that... That way, my tight interior would become lubricated—Ah, idiot! Shameless, too shameless! Unforgivable!"

Fear angered at her own imagination for quite a while before recalling something else. Feeling painful was the same as usual. However, there was one fact that was different from usual.

Her mindset had changed.

For the first time, she felt hesitant. Was inserting the Indulgence Disks really a good idea? Once inserted, her powers would be reduced. Her powers for facing powerful enemies would be reduced. Such as when fighting Hinai Elsie, perhaps the battle might have been easier had she been able to freely use the mechanisms that had been sealed so far.

"..."

She pressed harder on her lower abdomen. It was quite close that time. Haruaki's scream. She did not want to hear other people's screams. Admit it—She was almost about to go mad at the time.

However, in spite of that, she still did not go mad. Supposing she had not sealed any of her mechanisms to this date, perhaps she might have used all her powers to kill that girl. Perhaps she would

have lost her rationality, unable to suppress her powers, also possibly proceeding to attack everyone present, forgetting who was the real enemy.

The Indulgence Disks served as a suppressive power, a restraining power to seal away her madness. Only by continuing to gather them will she be free from the worry of going mad, then she can truly be like a human and focus her mind on lifting her curse.

But at the same time, the Indulgence Disks were taking away her powers, eliminating ways she could engage the enemy in battle. Continuing to collect them would mean losing all her powers and resisting attacking enemies would get increasingly difficult.

What a paradox.

She laughed and released the pressure of her hand on her abdomen. Because she remembered. When she was holding the Indulgence Disk in hesitation, when she was mentioning the paradox, Haruaki's face had displayed an expression.

She smiled wryly. He had simply said:

"That girl was the «Strongest», right? Yet you defeated her, so there's no need to be so concerned, right?"

Indeed. Her madness was still... very dangerous. In the end, she had to figure out a solution herself.

But when facing enemies, there was no need for her to handle them alone. Although it was quite infuriating, that Cow Tits was still around as well. And Kuroe. And Kirika. There were also others who might decide to interfere on their own, even though Fear did not want to involve them—

Bonds with other people... This type of resilience was what she possessed. Recalling this, her mood felt lightened unbelievably. Although she did not want to keep relying on other people's strength, it would be too foolish to panic and lose composure just because her weapons were decreasing.

"...Hmm, how should I say this...? Because I'm so amazing to begin with. With a bit of training from now on, as long as I still keep a hatchet and a drill, I should still be able to win effortlessly against any kind of enemy. Even without all my weapons, I'm still just as good as Cow Tits. Hmph... If there really is a need, it can't be helped, I'll just have to spar with her a little when I have time and learn some of her martial arts. Yes, the result is very simple. Even if I'm weakened, I just have to strengthen other areas in response."

After voicing it out as confirmation, Fear felt much more relaxed. She was surely correct.

Having completely dispelled her sleepiness, Fear pushed her blanket aside and stood up. Then she suddenly remembered. Right, today's date was—

Deciding it would be better to act sooner, she left her room and went to the kitchen. Just as she was about to open the fridge,

Konoha also happened to enter the kitchen. For some reason, her cheeks were a bit red and she was rubbing her face in embarrassment.

"Hmm, Cow Tits, what's with you?"

"Oh dear... Cough cough, since I've come to the kitchen, there can only be one purpose. Namely, to prepare breakfast."

After making seemingly fake coughs to hide something, Konoha stood at the kitchen counter and started preparing breakfast as claimed. In any case, after accepting her reason for being her, Fear reached into the fridge. Hidden in the deepest part of the fridge that was stuffed with ingredients, there was a plastic bag which basically said "Mine. Absolutely forbidden to open, especially Haruaki!" Fear glanced at Konoha then slowly left the kitchen while holding the bag.

(Uumuu~ Today is clearly that day but she's not showing that kind of mood... Did she forget about the contest? Oh well, it's fine if she forgot. Then I simply win by default.)

Inside the plastic bag was a box wrapped in cute wrapping paper. She had personally packaged this in Kirika's home after buying the materials yesterday, but the position of the butterfly bow was slightly crooked... Hmm, this was a fun part that only came with being handmade, so it was going to serve as a highlighted advantage.

Then Fear walked over to Haruaki's room and boldly slid open the paper door.

"Haruaki, are you awake!?"

"H-Hey! I'm awake but I'm changing right now! Don't just suddenly open the door!"

"Oh sorry. Normally, I'd scream at you for being shameless and give you a kick, but I'm partly responsible as well today. I'll turn around and give you five seconds, so hurry up and put on your clothes during this time."

"I don't need you to tell me to put on my clothes. Seriously..."

Fear counted five full seconds then turned around again. Although Haruaki barely managed to put on his pants while a number of his shirt buttons remained unfastened, she treated it as fine.

"So, what's with the sudden visit?"

What was going on? Only at the critical moment did she start feeling nervous. Feeling as though her throat was blocked, Fear said:

"O-Oh, actually... Today is Valentine's Day. Kana told me. She said today is the day when people give chocolate in gratitude to those who take care of them regularly. So... Umm... After all, I guess I've caused you a little trouble... So anyway, this is what it's about! So, h-here you go!"

She forcefully shoved the chocolate she had brought to Haruaki. Greatly surprised, Haruaki stared wide-eyed.

"Y-You? Seriously?"

"What, is it so strange for me to give you chocolate? I'll curse you!"

"Uh... No... Not strange... I guess. Eh, did you actually make this yourself?"

"Yeah. Because Kana told me that compared to store bought ones, making chocolate personally is better. Kirika helped in providing a place and other assistance, but I definitely made it myself from start to finish."

"You made it yourself huh... Amazing. How should I say it? That's so amazing. I'm really happy, thank you."

For some reason, Fear felt a sudden tightening in her chest the instant she saw Haruaki's happy expression with a smile all over his face. She felt breathing becoming difficult, her face going hot and her brain getting dizzy.

"A-All you keep on saying is amazing... H-Hmph, I am very amazing to begin with, so this is nothing to be surprised about. Anyway, hurry up and eat it with full sincerity. Come, eat it now!"

"Eh... Right now?"

"It'll melt if you put it aside!"

"I was thinking of putting it in the fridge... But I'm actually quite curious. Then I'll have a bite first."

Haruaki carefully untied the ribbon and opened the box. In accordance with what she investigated previously, the style stuck to the basics.

"This is ganache. Although it's very simple, I think it's the best. I also made it not excessively sweet."

"Okay, then thanks for the treat... Munch munch munch."

Haruaki picked up a piece of chocolate with his fingers and placed it lightly into his mouth. Fear gulped and stared intently while he chewed. How was it? How was it? She had tested the taste already, but after all, there was no guarantee that unforeseen changes might have occurred overnight.

At this moment, Haruaki suddenly widened his eyes.

Could there be some kind of problem? Fear frantically leaned forward.

"H-How is it? How is it?"

"...Delicious."

It took some time before this whisper reached Fear's ears.

"Yeah, mmm, this is really delicious. Fear, you're superb."

She felt a sense of warmth spreading from her heart. Her efforts had not gone to waste. Haruaki really looked very happy and even reached out for a second piece. Why did she feel so happy too? She felt really wonderful that she had made chocolate.

Feeling as though her entire body was floating, she could not stop her lips from grinning.

Suddenly, she began to wonder. This was simply chocolate she gave as a gift to express everyday gratitude. However, if she felt this kind of floating sensation simply from the person happily accepting her chocolate of thanks, what if the other person was smiling while accepting chocolate given to express love as Kana said—Ahhhh, that would be... truly...

She pondered while watching Haruaki's face, wondering if she might give that sort of chocolate to a certain person in the future.

No idea. However, she recalled that Valentine's Day was coming again next year as well. This made her look forward inexplicably—with some apprehension at the same time. She did not know why.

No no no, Fear shook her head. Anyway, the most important thing now was that Haruaki had happily accepted this year's chocolate. Confirm it once again. Confirming was not a bad thing, right?

"...Hey Haruaki, is it delicious? Is it really very delicious?"

"Yeah, it's really very delicious."

"...Super~ delicious?"

"Super~ delicious."

"Nuhu, that's good. Then you should savor it well and finish it completely. Also—"

Fear reached out, face to face, and placed both hands on Haruaki's shoulders. Since it was delicious, there was no doubt about it. In other words, she had won.

With a smile written all over her face, Fear applied a little pressure in her gaze to remind Haruaki not to forget something.

"Also—The return gift is thirty thousand yen of rice crackers. I'm filled with high expectations... Fufufu."

"Yeah, after eating it all, the return gift is thirty thousand... What, hold on a sec. What's with that term I've never heard before! ? What exactly are you expecting from me!?"

Part 4

After finishing breakfast, Kuroe handed chocolate to Haruaki as though saying "This is a snack." He originally wondered if he would get some sort of weird item like the rainbow-colored worm-shaped chocolate seen on television, but unexpectedly, it turned out to be ordinary chocolate.

Then reaching school, he found a small chocolate in his shoe locker. Taizou happened to see it and hammered the floor as though he were dealt a great blow, crying: "Only you! Damn it! There's no God in this world!" Haruaki ignored him and picked up the chocolate, only to find a note as well, written in a red pen like a frightening letter of blood that read: "Courtesy!" After seeing that,

Taizou smirked for some reason and breathed a sigh of relief while placing a hand on Haruaki's shoulder. On the back of the note, there was also a message: "Shiraho told me that it's the local custom to write the words on the cover in this kind of style, so she wrote it for me. So this is the chocolate that carries gratitude from both of us. Please accept with a smile ♪"... Sovereignty aside, the feelings poured into this chocolate by Shiraho were surely something even more terrifying and ominous.

The atmosphere in school seemed quite edgy and high-strung.

During break time, Haruaki witnessed many times the sight of people giving chocolate to one another while he was walking along the corridor, in the classroom or the courtyard. He also witnessed male friends gathered together in the washroom, whispering to each other: "Hey, how many did you receive...?" "What about you, who..." Haruaki was thinking they had something secret to discuss but they ended up strangling one another's necks in the next instant. Meanwhile, Kana was leisurely passing out Tirol chocolate to all the classmates as usual. Haruaki received one as well.

During lunchtime, the usual lunch duel took place again. What was different from usual—"Konoha-san didn't show up... Clearly I've been trying so hard to talk to her since Term 1... I still haven't reached the level of courtesy...?" Taizou was quite depressed, while Kirika was absentmindedly spacing out and Kana was frequently elbowing Kirika in the flank as though going "Hurry! Hurry!" On the other hand, Fear was wolfing down her lunchbox as usual as though she had already accomplished what she was supposed to do.

After finishing his lunch, Haruaki left the classroom, thinking of going to the washroom.

Then just as he was walking in the corridor, someone suddenly called out to him from behind. He looked back.

Awkwardly, her gaze was wandering all over the place, but at the same time, her entire body exuded a sense of nervousness—Then she spoke:

"Yachi, umm... I have something to talk to you about... F-Follow me."

The chosen destination was the roof. Luckily—or perhaps miraculously—there were no other people at all.

Kirika took a deep breath. There was no going back.

"Class Rep, you said you had something to tell me...? Is there another problem...?"

"N-No, it's nothing. Every day has been calm and peaceful."

Indeed, there was no problem every day.

Ever since that night, Himura had not reappeared. He not only abandoned his identity as a teacher but also his identity as a researcher, his whereabouts a mystery. She had stayed on alert for quite a while, but nothing changed—Hence, in the end...

That man must have vanished.

Gone past the curse's limit.

Even if he had escaped successfully that night with his consciousness intact, she did not think he would never use the mask again. Amidst days of peace and calm, the longer time went by, the higher the chance he had vanished.

She kept getting the feeling she will never see him again.

If she told this to her past self that this was going to happen; if she told her past self that still called that man "Senpai" at the time... What would she think—?

Absolutely ridiculous. Pondering such matters was completely pointless. Kirika shook her head.

"Uh... Is it about Amanda?"

"No, not that either. But after some time, I intend to ask Un Izoey to let us visit her... Cough cough, anyway, no. Absolutely ridiculous. What I want to talk about is something else."

She forcefully pulled her consciousness back to what she was supposed to do next.

What she was supposed to do was very simple. She had been thinking about this all along.

Hence, Kirika took the object out from her pocket.

"It's basically handmade, but I don't know if the taste will be to your liking."

"Chocolate? Ohoh... Thank you. Uh... I never expected to receive one from you, Class Rep, because I was thinking you might not be interested in this kind of festival... Although it's surprising, I'm very happy. I will savor it carefully."

"Th-Then in that case, I'll be very grateful. Also, ummm—"

She stammered. The instant she saw his smiling face, her mind went completely blank.

She clenched her fist tightly, trying to make that blank mind regain rationality. Just at this moment—

"Oh right, Class Rep. That girl Fear gave me chocolate too and said something about your assistance... I have to thank you for that too. She didn't cause you any trouble, did she?"

In her originally blank mind, that girl's face surfaced. Immediately, as though attached in a series, the face of the glasses-wearing girl with twin braids also surfaced next.

Kirika smiled wryly. Unbelievably, her mind was gradually turning calm.

How troubling, to think he would start talking about other girls at a time like this. Yachi, you really should read the mood.

"Oh... You don't need to worry. I only lent her my kitchen and started her off with some instructions for beginners. The rest was all Fear-kun's own hard work. She put in a lot of effort so you really must savor it carefully."

"Yeah, I ate a few already, it's quite tasty. I was so surprised."

Fear had already given her chocolate to him. Presumably, Konoha had also gave her gift as well.

But that did not matter.

She had been thinking. While helping Fear make chocolate by hand, she had been thinking all along.

She was not going to participate in the contest.

"Then that's it. Since I need to prepare for next period, I'm going back first."

With a calm smile, Kirika turned around.

She intended to leave the roof before him.

"Oh Class Rep! Let me say this again, thank you!"

She heard his voice coming from behind.

Just as she was about to open the roof's iron door, Kirika stopped walking.

"Yachi, I forgot to say something important."

Yes, indeed—She was not going to participate in the contest.

From the moment her body was enveloped by a curse, from the moment she was forced to wear the cursed outfit, she had given up on many many things. Hence, imagination alone was very sufficient, thoughts alone was very sufficient—

That was what she always believed.

But then she recalled what that girl had said, towards that foolish man, those words of reprimand.

There is nothing more shameful and unsightly than this kind of love where you've given up on fighting from the start.

Kirika agreed with what that girl had said.

Hence, for the sake of herself who had abandoned everything till now, Kirika—

From this moment onwards—

"That chocolate is not out of courtesy."

Kirika gave up on "giving up on fighting."

"Eh...?" Leaving Haruaki behind in puzzlement, Kirika closed the roof's iron door.

After taking a deep breath, she began to walk, descending down the stairs, step by step.

Valentine's Day. For girls, this festival was a deathmatch in the contest of love.

But she was different. To the point that she did not even have the right to stand on that battlefield.

She must first take the first step. If she did not want to be a disgraced coward, she must stand upon the battlefield, even at the risk of suffering defeat.

Because she was different from Himura Sunao.

Different from that selfish man who wanted to obtain happiness despite giving up on fighting.

In other words, what she had said just now was—

A declaration of war, in order to exhibit this resolve of hers.

Kirika recalled in her mind those formidable rivals.

Making an expression like a proud warrior about to face an imminent battle of honor, she smiled and murmured.

"The way I see it, the title of the 'strongest' should belong to those

girls instead, right? Although there's an absolutely ridiculous difference in combat potential... Well then, how should I face them in battle?"



Afterword

It's already been half a year since Volume IX. For readers who are following «Aisakasuteki Syndrome», it's been four months. Sorry for making you wait, but let me hereby present C³ X!

Say, it's X! X! Neither the English letter nor the × symbol, it's the Roman numeral meaning 10! To me, it's my first time to write a series reaching double digits in volume count. To be honest, I never thought I could write for so long when I first started this series... It's all thanks to everyone's support. Thank you!

Well then, this time our new character is the cap-wearing, barefooted, cheerful boobs. Quite active in the story. Also, although it isn't because the 10th volume happens to be a milestone, this volume's conception seems to tie together many threads, foreshadowing or characters from earlier volumes. In fact, when I was writing the draft, I couldn't help but feel quite nostalgic. Like the first volume is already two years ago... Time sure flies. As a side note, there are quite a few characters reappearing in this volume. For *her*, it counts as a planned appearance. As for *those girls*, it feels more like "thank goodness they got a chance to appear."

Anyway, that's that. If you have time after finishing this book, readers, please reread some of the previous volumes—"Oh, this name that appears in Volume 10 is here..." or "This volume links up with Volume 10 here..." Perhaps you might make some totally new discoveries. Or maybe not. Yes, in that sense, if a reader starts

following this series with Volume 10's release and catches up all at once, it's probably the best deal... Ufufu? (Giving dirty looks at those who simply stand in the bookstore to preview the afterwords .)

Well then, next comes the acknowledgements. Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, including the very Valentine's Day-style Fear on the cover, thank you very much for drawing beautiful illustrations again! Editor Yuasa-sama, I'm very sorry for causing you trouble every single time... I continue to be in your care! As for the designers, proofreaders, sales and everyone involved in the book's publishing, and of course—although I'm repeated myself—the many readers who helped me reach the milestone of Volume 10, a great thank you to all of you!

Having finished reading this volume, readers may perhaps have discovered already that some of the characters' feelings are starting to undergo subtle changes. Currently, I still have not considered when to end this series exactly, but I am certain that the story has already entered its second half. If everyone could continue to stay with this story for a while, it'll be a great honor.

So, let's meet again for Volume 11~ I have a feeling that Haruaki and his friends will have already ascended to their second year of high school. In other words, I have a feeling that a certain arrogant junior and a smiling shrine maiden will be reappearing. But ultimately, it's just a feeling, so it could end up being just a spring break story. In any case, I continue to be in everyone's care!

Minase Hazuki

Translator's Notes and References

1. [↑](#) **Echigoya**(越): a reference to the successful Mitsui family business, founded in the 17th century, that developed into Mitsukoshi, the root business of the Mitsui Group, one of the largest conglomerates in Japan. Apparently used as an euphemism for bribery. [\[1\]](#)
2. [↑](#) **Mapo Doufu**(麻): a popular dish of spicy bean curd, originating from Sichuan province of China. [\[2\]](#)
3. [↑](#) **Red bean jelly**(羊): yōkan is a thick jellied dessert made of red bean paste, agar and sugar. [\[3\]](#)